ABSTRACT

Name: Amy M. Godfrey Department: History

Title: Divine Benevolence to the Poor: Charity, Religion and Nationalism in Early National New York City, 1784-1820

Major: History Degree: Doctor of Philosophy

Approved by: Date:

Stephen Foster 27 July '07

Dissertation Director

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

During the Early National Period, the United States witnessed the rise of reform organizations, or benevolent societies, dedicated to eliminating perceived social ills in the new republic. This project focuses on organizations in New York City that attempted to reduce the effects of poverty in the city by distributing material relief, promoting moral reform, and evangelizing the poor. I argue that a combination of Calvinist doctrine and nationalist sentiment motivated the founders of New York's benevolent movement. Calvinist attitudes toward poverty, particularly the beliefs that the poor bore some responsibility for their situation and that vice produced poverty, shaped the societies' relief policies. At the same time, nationalist concerns about the republic's economic, political and social stability spurred the creation of benevolent societies. The founders hoped that their efforts at poor relief would play a role in creating a city, and perhaps a nation, more prosperous and morally superior to its European counterparts.

Previous studies have examined the rise of organized benevolence, but this project is unique in its emphasis on religious doctrine and nationalism. Earlier works adhered to the "social control" model, which argued that the predominantly middle-class members of benevolent organizations hoped that their style of poor relief and moral reform would impose order upon the potentially volatile lower classes. This argument is true to a point, but it does not provide a complete explanation of the

members' motives. Eighteenth-century Protestant definitions of poverty combined with nineteenth-century secular notions of nationalism also brought about New York's benevolent movement and created a new form of charity.

This dissertation utilizes a combination of archival and published primary sources in addition to secondary literature. Archival sources such as minutes of the various societies' meetings, letters, private papers and municipal records provide a great deal of information about the daily workings of the benevolent organizations. Published sources including the societies' annual reports and sermons shed light on the founders' motivations for organizing their societies as well as their attitudes toward the poor men, women and children they assisted.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

DIVINE BENEVOLENCE TO THE POOR: CHARITY, RELIGION AND NATIONALISM IN EARLY NATIONAL NEW YORK CITY, 1784-1820

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

BY

AMY MARGARET GODFREY

DEKALB, ILLINOIS

AUGUST 2007

Certification: In accordance with departmental and Graduate School policies, this dissertation is accepted in partial fulfillment of degree requirements.

Stephen Fox

Dissertation Director

27 July '07

Date

AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to express sincere appreciation to Professor Stephen Foster for his assistance in the preparation of this manuscript. In addition, special thanks are due to the staff at the New York Historical Society for their help during my numerous visits to their library. I also thank the members of my committee, Professor Beatrix Hoffman, Professor Barbara Posadas and Professor Hana Layson, for their valuable input.

This project was supported in part by grants from the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, the Hayter-Young Endowment and the Northern Illinois University History Department. My husband, Gene, also provided a great deal of emotional support and professional assistance throughout this undertaking.

DEDICATION

To Gene, with love and gratitude

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

RELIGIOUS BENEVOLENCE AND POOR RELIEF IN EARLY NATIONAL NEW YORK CITY (1784-1820)

After the American Revolution, a host of voluntary organizations including private charities, temperance organizations, Bible societies, and abolitionist groups cropped up throughout the United States and coalesced into an interconnected network that eventually came to be called the "Benevolent Empire." Each of these "benevolent societies" concentrated on a specific social problem such as slavery, irreligion, or ignorance and adopted strategies to combat these perceived ills through social and moral reform. This study focuses on one such collection of reform societies, the Protestant organizations that targeted poverty in New York City from 1784 to 1820. These benevolent societies played a particularly important role in the evolution of the city's poor relief system by redefining the nature and causes of poverty, identifying new "cures" for this problem, and altering the relationship between public and private relief agencies.

I will argue that the impetus to form these societies stemmed from a combination of Calvinist theology and nationalist sentiment. The social reformers who made up the organizations were primarily concerned with their Christian duty to help the poor and used their Calvinist convictions—the theological principles held by most of the societies' members—both to define the problem of poverty and to implement its

cures. At the same time, the reformers were determined to help the new Republic survive in its early years. They believed that poverty was one of the most serious obstacles to the success of New York City in particular—and the new nation in general—and hoped that their efforts would strengthen the country's economic, social, and moral health. This combination of Calvinist and nationalist thought marked a unique departure from colonial attitudes towards poor relief, which made a much clearer distinction between the roles of religious charity and public alms. Now in the Early National Period, New York reformers infused the political idea of civic or national duty with religious ideology, bridging the gap between the secular and the spiritual.

The benevolent societies of the Early National Period have been an important subject for historical study. Earlier historiography tends to approach these organizations through the "social control" model. According to this paradigm, middle-class reformers established voluntary organizations to monitor and "reform" the behaviors of the poor out of fear that poverty unrelieved and unreformed would breed riot and rebellion. Two studies from 1960, Charles Foster's *An Errand of Mercy: The Evangelical United Front, 1790-1837*, and Clifford S. Griffin's *Their Brothers' Keepers: Moral Stewardship in the United States, 1800-1865*, argue that evangelical voluntary societies used their vision of the Gospel in the early nineteenth century primarily to promote an "appropriate" form of morality among the poor and ensure social stability. Calling this movement the "Evangelical United Front," Foster argues that these societies in general were a "conservative counteroffensive" to such threats as deism, growing irreligion, and the new American government's commitment to the

separation of church and state. Here he is echoing the middle-class reformers' fears that irreligion undermined the moral restraints that Christianity imposed on society and that prevented crime, riot and rebellion among the masses. Benevolence, with its emphasis on evangelical Christianity, was thought to be the perfect antidote to such "infidelity" and its dangerous social consequences. Griffin agrees, but adds a political element to his argument by reasoning that the Federalist Party used benevolent societies as a tool to "reform" the lower classes, who usually voted Republican, and transform them into "virtuous" citizens and *voting* Federalists.[1]

Foster and Griffin examine a wide range of voluntary societies, but the social control theory also influenced historians who narrow their focus to the study of societies that dealt specifically with poverty and poor relief in the new Republic. Raymond Mohl's *Poverty in New York, 1783-1825*, published in 1971, modifies the social control theory to argue that the motivation behind benevolence was two-fold. On the one hand, charity stemmed from a genuine concern among middle-class philanthropists for the well-being of the poor. Charity was an honest attempt to relieve the economic suffering of poor men and women. One the other hand, the reformers also wished to control the "dangerous" potential of the poor by instilling what they considered to be proper morals and Protestant values. John K. Alexander's 1980 study, *Render Them Submissive: Responses to Poverty in Philadelphia, 1760-1800*, goes further and argues that the goal of both public and private forms of poor relief was to maintain the rigid separation of

[1] Charles I. Foster, *An Errand of Mercy: The Evangelical United Front, 1790-1837* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1960); Clifford S. Griffin, *Their Brothers' Keepers: Moral Stewardship in the United States, 1800-1865* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1960).

classes that characterized the colonial period and persuade the poor to accept their low socio-economic status in the new Republic.[2]

My own understanding of the benevolent societies does not fall into the category of "social control," although I do argue that reformers attempted to use charity and religious reform to reshape the behaviors and values of the poor. Middle-class members of benevolent societies did want to instill in the poor habits of "industry" and "morality" to make them productive members of society, and many middle-class men and women did harbor fears of disorder and rebellion. I argue, however, that a sense of Christian duty—in its Calvinist form—combined with a concern for the well-being of the newly established Republic served as the primary motivation for religious benevolence. Some kind of social control will always come into play when an economically and politically powerful class of individuals attempts to "reform" those with less power, but these are not the would-be reformers' only or primary motives.

Carroll Smith Rosenberg's *Religion and the Rise of the American City: The New York City Mission Movement, 1812-1870*, also questions the social control argument. Her 1971 work focuses on New York's city missions, evangelical institutions that attempted to spread Protestant Christianity to the poor. She argues that the missions served to uphold social order only up to a point and that the true impetus behind the missions was the spirit of revivalism generated by the Second Great Awakening. Messages of millennialism and perfectionism spread by preachers such as Charles G. Finney prompted reformers to use the Gospel as a tool to improve society and to make

---

[2] Raymond Mohl, *Poverty in New York, 1783-1825* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); John K. Alexander, *Render Them Submissive: Responses to Poverty in Philadelphia, 1760-1800* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980).

the attempt to cure such apparently intransigent social ills such as poverty. Rosenberg, however, focuses on the period following 1820 and argues that the benevolent societies before this time were primarily secular in nature.[3] My research has found that these earlier societies were not secular but in fact evangelical, as the reformers of the Early National Period tried to use religion and revivalism in their own efforts.

Despite Carroll Smith Rosenberg's emphasis on revivalism, her contemporaries and successors continue to be influenced by the social control model, particularly those who have focused on public institutions and the *secular* motivations behind relief. In his 1971 work, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic,* David J. Rothman examines the rise of asylums, including municipal almshouses, which created a closed institutional setting to provide the poor with "indoor" relief and reform. Adopting the social control model, he argues that these institutions were a *secular* response to fears of growing disorder and social instability. Government leaders in the nineteenth century, particularly at the municipal level, transformed almshouses into workhouses to encourage discipline and proper work habits among the poor. Moreover, the hard work and drudgery of the workhouse was also meant to deter those who might apply for aid unless they were genuinely desperate. Two other works, Robert Cray's *Paupers and Poor Relief in New York City and Its Rural Environs, 1700-1830* (1988), and David M. Schneider's *The History of Public*

[3] Carroll Smith Rosenberg, *Religion and the Rise of the American City: The New York City Mission Movement, 1812-1870* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971).

Welfare in New York State, 1609-1866 (1969), similarly examine the evolution of the state's poor laws and public institutions in much the same terms.[4]

Although all of these works are important in understanding the nature of New York's poor relief systems, my project differs in that it argues that the religious-secular dichotomy they favor did not exist in Early National poor relief practices. *Both* religious and secular motivations existed in these institutions, whether they were private charities or the public almshouse. The reformers who organized benevolent societies, in particular, were inspired by both a Christian duty to alleviate poverty and a utilitarian desire to create a strong Republic. These two concepts—religious inspiration and secular utopianism—were not at odds with one another but rather fused to create a new form of benevolence in New York City.

More recent studies of benevolent societies and poverty in the Early National Period consider such topics as the culture of poverty, religion and gender. A 2004 collection of essays edited by Billy G. Smith, *Down and Out in Early America*, addresses all of these themes. Smith argues that new studies of early American poverty are necessary because historians have neglected this topic over the last few decades. Echoing the complaints of historians of the 1970s such as Raymond Mohl, he claims that once again Americans have accepted the myth that early America was an era of general prosperity in which poverty was either temporary or exceptional. The various essays in this collection describe the widespread presence of poverty in both the

---

[4] David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971); Robert E. Cray, Jr., *Paupers and Poor Relief in New York City and Its Rural Environs, 1700-1830* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); David M. Schneider, *The History of Public Welfare in New York State, 1609-1866* (Montclair: Patterson Smith, 1969).

Colonial and Early National Periods, a time when many individuals were either locked in to a state of more-or-less permanent poverty or in nearly continuous danger of becoming impoverished. The authors cover a broad category of the "poor," including working men and women, slaves, orphans, farmers and Native Americans. One essay in particular, Monique Bourque's "Poor Relief 'Without Violating the Rights of Humanity': Almshouse Administration in the Philadelphia Region, 1790-1860," argues that poor relief should be studied within the larger context of the community. Her essay focuses on the relationships between the poor residing in the almshouse and the local community including relief officials, merchants, shopkeepers and hired workers employed by the almshouse. This new approach refuses to see the poor as an isolated population within public institutions and instead emphasizes the broadly communal nature of relief. The boundaries of public institutions and private charities were porous in nature and part of a larger network of relief in which many members of the community interacted and participated.[5]

Simon Newman's *Embodied History: The Lives of the Poor in Early Philadelphia*, also approaches the study of poor relief in a new way. His book is part of the "linguistic turn," a movement that provides a cultural rather than an economic or political interpretation of poverty. He examines the poor within the context of the community as a whole and argues that the appearance of poor men and women—their bodies, clothing and physical movements—separated them from wealthier Philadelphians. Public institutions, such as the almshouse, used these differences in appearance to determine which poor men and women were "worthy" of assistance and

[5] Billy G. Smith, ed., *Down and Out in Early America* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004).

which were not. Those neat in appearance and free from deforming illness such as syphilis received preferential treatment. Often officials exacerbated these differences by withholding quality food from those deemed "unworthy" and forcing poor men and women to perform manual labor. Although Newman argues that poor relief measures included measures of social control, his cultural approach to poverty and poor relief is markedly different from earlier works.[6]

Gender has also become an important topic for historians examining the cultural construction of poverty. Anne M. Boylan's *The Origins of Women's Activism: New York and Boston, 1797-1840*, examines a wide range of female voluntary organizations in two northern cities and describes how this early form of women's organization helped create nineteenth-century concepts of womanhood. Lori Ginzberg's *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* examines women's associations in terms of class and discusses how their activities helped shape a middle-class identity. Bruce Dorsey's *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* is unique in that it examines the roles of both men and women in benevolence in order to discover how concepts such as manhood and womanhood developed in nineteenth-century Philadelphia.[7]

This dissertation will make use of a cultural interpretation of poverty by discussing the ways in which the community defined the poor and constructed "cures" for their condition. These definitions changed over the course of the Early National

---

[6] Simon P. Newman, *Embodied History: The Lives of the Poor in Early Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

[7] Anne M. Boylan, *The Origins of Women's Activism: New York and Boston, 1797-1840* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

Period as reformers adjusted their strategies to meet the changing needs of their community. Despite their ability to modify their strategies, the reformers never abandoned their cultural baggage and consistently constructed "cures" for poverty based on their own social and religious assumptions. I will argue that the basis of these assumptions is found in the convergence of Calvinist theology and early American nationalism. New York's reformers adopted a Calvinist approach to poor relief claiming that poverty was a natural phenomenon and that they, as Christians, had a divinely mandated duty to help the poor. At the same time, they hoped that their efforts would create a stronger nation that surpassed Europe economically, politically and spiritually.

I have focused on New York City because of its position as a great Atlantic port city and its political significance during the Early National Period. The city had been the nation's capital in 1789 and its commercial economy had been and remained central to the national economy. New York was also a city of diversity due to the influx of European immigrants and migration from the countryside. One of the results of these migrations was religious pluralism, making New York the home of Catholics, Jews and a wide assortment of Protestants. These aspects of New York City in the Early National Period have drawn the attention of a wide range of historians. Classic studies include works by Christine Stansell, Howard Rock, Shane White, Sean Wilentz, and Paul Gilje. More recently historians such as Edwin G. Burrows, Mike Wallace, Ira Berlin, Tyler Anbinder, and William Kornblum have also focused their research on this important

urban center in this period.[8] My work adopts a different approach to studying this important city by focusing on the spiritual and secular nature of its benevolence movement.

Benevolence, however, was not purely a local or national phenomenon, and my project points out that similar institutions proliferated in Europe at the time. British societies, in particular, served as models or inspiration for their American counterparts. For all that the Americans trumpeted the superiority and exceptionality of their institutions, they borrowed heavily from their European counterparts—particularly those in London. American publishers even reprinted the annual reports of British charitable societies for readers in the United States. The members of New York's societies frequently corresponded with Europeans, exchanging information and ideas.

I have relied on a combination of archival and published primary sources to research New York City's benevolent organizations. The New York Historical Society holds a number of the societies' records, including those of the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children; the Humane Society; the Association for the Relief of Respectable, Aged, Indigent Females; the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism; and the Christian Benevolent Society. Its archives also house the papers of the Rev.

---

[8] Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Howard B. Rock, *Artisans of the New Republic: The Tradesmen of New York City in the Age of Jefferson* (New York: New York University Press, 1984); Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770-1810* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991); Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Paul A. Gilje, *Road to Mobocracy: Popular Disorder in New York City, 1763-1834* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987); Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Ira Berlin and Leslie Harris, eds., *Slavery in New York* (New York: New Press, 2005); Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points: The Nineteenth-Century New York City Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum* (New York: The Free Press, 2001); William Kornblum, *At Sea in the City: New York from the Water's Edge* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2002).

John Stanford and Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton, two important leaders of the benevolence movement. The New York Municipal Archives contains many useful political documents including the benevolent organizations' petitions to the Common Council, New York City's governing body. All of the societies also published annual reports detailing their efforts. These, along with the published sermons of various ministers, provide a great deal of information about the origin and progress of each organization. Previous historians have utilized these sources, but my work comes to a different conclusion about the motivations of the reformers.

Chapter One traces the overall development of poor relief—both private and public—from the colonial era to the end of the American Revolution and examines the circumstances under which benevolent societies first emerged. It provides important background information to benevolence in the Early National Period and demonstrates that the relief practices used in the new Republic were quite different from those in the colonial era. When New Yorkers began to return to their homes in 1784 after almost a decade of exile during the British occupation of their city, they realized that colonial systems of poor relief were no longer adequate and that new measures had to be adopted if the city hoped to cope with the unprecedented numbers of poor men and women who were suffering from years of war and dislocation.

The evolution of benevolence in the Early National Period evolved in three stages. Chapter Two discusses the rise of what I call the "first wave of benevolence," which began in the late eighteenth century and focused on providing direct and (mostly) immediate relief to the poor. Organizations formed at this stage include the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children, the Orphan Asylum Society and the

Association for the Relief of Respectable, Aged, and Indigent Females. These organizations, as well as many others, distributed cash, fuel and other provisions as a means of helping the poor survive at the most basic level. Although religious instruction and job training were a part of these early organizations, their policies emphasized direct relief to groups of the poor who were clearly in desperate need through what could reasonably be described as no fault of their own.

Chapters Three and Four examine the "second wave of benevolence," which focused on the moral and religious reform of the poor rather than material relief. These organizations argued that the main cause of poverty was sin and that if the poor adopted the values and habits appropriate to an ascetic Protestant morality, they would be able to become self-supporting and no longer dependent on charity. Chapter Three discusses the city mission movement, which emerged in New York after 1812. The organizations associated with this movement dispatched missionaries to the almshouse, prison and hospital and established churches in poor neighborhoods in an attempt to spread their version of Christianity and its stern moral code. The leaders of the missions held that these two factors—the Gospel and moral reform—would lead to conviction, conversion and a reformation of life among the poor.

Chapter Four focuses on the Magdalen Society, a short-lived organization that tried to reform the city's prostitutes through religious instruction and alternative employment. The Society, like the city missions, emphasized moral reform, but it targeted a very specific vice—prostitution. Prostitution, the society held, aggravated the problem of poverty in that it impoverished both the prostitutes who sold their bodies and the men who solicited them. Moreover, the reformers argued that prostitution was a

moral drain on the community and inconsistent with their utilitarian plans to create a better society. The Magdalen Society was part of the second wave of benevolence, but in many ways it bridged the gap between the first two. The society drew its membership from both the first and second waves as more and more philanthropists saw the advantages of moral reform over direct relief.

Chapter Five discusses the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism, an organization founded in 1819 that dominated the "third wave of benevolence."[9] Rather than focus on either relief or reform, this society sought ways to eliminate "pauperism"—a specific form of poverty characterized by the complete dependence of the poor on charity for survival. The members of the SPP investigated what they considered to be the causes of this type of poverty and produced reports on how to remedy the problem. The assumptions and conclusions of this organization would have a large impact on future conceptions of the nature of charities in the nineteenth century.

Overall, this study argues that complex motives can be found in organized benevolence. The middle-class men and women who founded benevolent societies certainly did harbor fears of rebellion and disorder among the poor and fashioned their organizations as a form of prevention and defense against such chaos. Their primary motives, however, were more utopian in nature. A combined sense of religious duty and republican nationalism convinced them that they could create an improved American society that escaped the crime, poverty, and alleged immorality of Europe. Despite its limited success in alleviating poverty and its ultimate failure to create such a

[9] Ann Boylan refers to the time period between 1823-1840 as the "third wave" of benevolent activity. This use of terminology is different from my own, as I only examine the Early National Period until 1820. In my work, the third wave of benevolence begins in 1819 with the establishment of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism.

utopia, New York's benevolent movement was more a movement of optimism and progress rather than simply one of reaction to fear.

CHAPTER I

"BUT WE MAY BE ALL UNITED IN AFFECTION": POVERTY, RELIGION, AND THE RISE OF ORGANIZED BENEVOLENCE IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY NEW YORK

As the Rev. John Rodgers began his sermon on December 11, 1783, a nation-wide day of "public thanksgiving," he recited Psalm 126, the Old Testament tribute to Israel's release from the Babylonian captivity. Likening New York City's returning refugees to the ancient Israelites who had also suffered many years of exile, Rodgers thanked God for the successful conclusion of the war for American independence. For the previous seven years the British had occupied New York City, forcing thousands of inhabitants, including Rodgers himself, to flee to the countryside. Now that the British had finally evacuated, the exiles had begun to return to their homes and the city could begin its long process of reconstruction. Rodgers's sermon, *The Divine Goodness Displayed in the American Revolution*, proudly recounted the military and political accomplishments of the Americans while instructing listeners on the proper way to rebuild their community after many years of war and dislocation. According to Rodgers, the independence of the United States would ultimately lead to "a new era in the history of mankind." "Heaven designed our emancipation," he declared. The United States could now become an example for the rest of the world, serving as an "asylum for the oppressed" and even an agent in the "universal establishment of the Messiah's kingdom." Paraphrasing the seventeenth-century Puritan leader John

Winthrop, Rodgers stressed the urgency of the situation: "The eyes of the nations of the earth, and particularly the eyes of all Europe are upon these States, to see what use they will make of the great things God has done for us." The new Republic had a duty to succeed, an obligation owed to God and to the entire world as well.[1]

Rodgers warned his listeners not to be too confident: "Perhaps there never was a nation, that had the fair opportunity of becoming the happiest people on earth that we now have. But *misery* as well as *happiness*, lies before us, (and both in the extreme) unless the present state of things is *wisely* improved by us." Rodgers was referring to the extremes of wealth and poverty that resulted from the war and now threatened to undermine the nation's economic and social stability. He urged those listeners with means to help the less fortunate—particularly the numerous widows and orphans in their midst. He also called upon the city's inhabitants to restore "virtue" and "piety" to their community. A nation that allowed poverty, immorality and "profaness" to flourish would never serve as an example for the rest of the world. Nor could it play its destined role in the spread of Christianity to all corners of the world.[2]

Rodgers's words signaled that the city's religious leaders had adopted a new attitude which assigned to the United States a prominent role in a larger divine mission. To ensure the success of the new nation, he and other reformers across New York City began a crusade against what they saw as dangers to the Republic—immorality, irreligion, and most of all, poverty. They created private voluntary organizations, known as benevolent societies, to reduce poverty and promote moral reform in New

---

[1] John Rodgers, *The Divine Goodness Displayed in the American Revolution: A Sermon, Preached in New York, December 11, 1783 Appointed by Congress as a Day of Public Thanksgiving Throughout the United States* (New York, 1784), 1,13, 32-33.
[2] Ibid., 37.

York City, a city which was quickly becoming the political, economic and social center of the United States.

The impetus to form benevolent societies in Early National New York emerged from a combination of nationalist sentiment and Calvinist doctrine. Middle-class reformers hoped to create a Protestant city populated by prosperous, virtuous and "useful" citizens who consciously served God's ends. Each organization operated under two assumptions. The first was that although the newly created United States had the potential to be a superior society, poverty threatened the economic, social and moral stability of the Republic. Second, the primary sources of this poverty were a pervasive lack of religious commitment and widespread immorality among the poor rather than the swings of the market economy. If the poor could be taught to live pious and moral lives, the reformers rationalized, then they could rise out of their indigence and become useful citizens. Only then could the new Republic prove itself to be a bastion of democracy and Protestantism for the rest of the world to imitate.

Poverty and Poor Relief in Colonial New York City

Although Colonial New York City did not have as many paupers as other cities in British North America, such as Philadelphia or Boston, the proportion of the poor in its population was significant enough to require both public and private attention. In the year 1700 only thirty-five names appeared on the city's public welfare rolls out of a total population of less than five thousand people; thirteen years later, this number decreased to seventeen. In both cases, the majority of these individuals were widows,

orphans, the sick, elderly and disabled. Increased immigration from Europe beginning in the second decade of the eighteenth century, however, created a permanent pauper class in the city, forcing municipal authorities and private individuals to step up their relief efforts and search for a more permanent solution to the growing problem of poverty.[3]

New York's municipal government played the dominant role in distributing poor relief during the colonial era. While the city was a part of the British empire, New York's institutions borrowed heavily from the English relief system and its emphasis on local government responsibility for the poor. Modeled after the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601, New York's colonial laws of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries levied poor taxes to raise funds for relief efforts, created residency laws to determine which of the poor should receive aid and which should be "resettled" to other parts of the country, and eventually called for the construction of an almshouse to give indoor shelter to the most destitute. The purpose of this system was to control relief expenditures by limiting aid to only those who were legal residents of the city and who were deemed "worthy" of assistance.[4]

Officials in New York City known as "overseers of the poor" divided paupers into distinct categories, treating each differently. The "helpless" or "deserving" poor were those who were unable to provide for themselves because of illness, disability or age. The sick, elderly and orphaned fell under this category and received cash, clothing, food and other commodities necessary for survival. The "undeserving poor," in

---

[3]Cray, 31, 42; Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness: The First Century of Urban Life in America, 1625-1742* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1964), 236.
[4]Mohl, 38-39; Schneider, 87; Cray, 36-37; Bridenbaugh, 78-79.

contrast, were often referred to as "vagrants" and "beggars" and as such received little sympathy. City officials either removed these individuals outside of the city limits or placed them in the bridewell, or city jail. The final category, or "able-bodied" poor, were the unemployed men and women who were physically able to work but for a variety of reasons could not find employment. These individuals received job training, such as it was. Eventually these men and women would reside in the almshouse, or workhouse, where they completed menial tasks such as "picking oakum."[5]

At first the city aldermen served as the "overseers of the poor." The city government, or Common Council, consisted of the mayor, recorder, and aldermen. One of the many responsibilities of this last group was to designate paupers in their wards and distribute direct relief from the city treasury that had been raised by poor rates. The establishment of the Anglican Church in 1689 slightly altered this arrangement. After 1691, elected "vestrymen" or "church wardens" occupied the role as overseers of the poor. Although churchmen now oversaw the distribution of public funds, poor relief was still considered to be part of the municipal government's responsibilities. The interconnected relationship between the Anglican Church and the city government after establishment meant that the church and state had a joint obligation to levy poor taxes and distribute aid. Both institutions acted as public guardians of the poor for the remainder of the colonial era.[6]

The cash and other commodities supplied by the overseers of the poor became known as "outdoor relief" because the recipients continued to live on their own despite their reliance on municipal support. The "outdoor" poor lived with friends, relatives, or

---

[5] Mohl, 39; Cray, 39.
[6] Mohl, 41-42; Cray, 37; Bridenbaugh, 84, 236; Schneider, 65-68.

even in their own homes but required additional public aid in order to survive. Often, the city government would provide these men and women with services or items that they would otherwise be unable to afford, such as shoes, firewood and medical attention. The city, however, required recipients of outdoor relief to wear blue and red badges with the letters "NY" on their clothing to designate them as public charges. As a result, the men and women listed on the outdoor relief rolls stood out from the rest of the city's population.[7]

In 1736, the city opened the doors of its first almshouse. The growing numbers of paupers combined with the rising cost of outdoor relief convinced city officials that they needed to construct a permanent house for the poor. Interestingly, the official name of the structure was the "House of Correction, Workhouse and Poor House," revealing the assumption that there was a connection between poverty and crime and that these two groups—paupers and criminals—should be lodged in the same facility. This new type of relief was known as "indoor" relief because impoverished men and women now lived inside the almshouse. The purpose of indoor relief was to provide the poor with shelter and work in the hopes that the "able-bodied" would defray the cost of their lodging with their own labor. More importantly to city officials, the almshouse would give them a place to house the many street beggars who caused so much alarm among the city's upper classes. Both the "deserving" poor—orphans, the sick, elderly or disabled—and "unworthy" poor—vagrants and beggars—lived in this structure,

[7] Mohl, 41-42; Bridenbaugh, 236; Schneider, 64.

albeit in different rooms to avoid the latter group corrupting the morals and industry of the former.[8]

Although public forms of aid dominated the colonial relief system, private individuals and organizations also participated in charitable work. Before the opening of the almshouse, the overseers of the poor often placed paupers in the homes of private families who would receive a stipend from the city government to help with their support.[9] Mutual aid societies served as another source of private relief for impoverished members of various trades and ethnic groups. The Society of House Carpenters and the Marine Society, for instance, aided the families of indigent men in their respective trades. The Scots Charitable Society likewise aided impoverished Scottish immigrants. Organizations such as the Society for the Promotion of Arts, Agriculture and Economy attempted to create jobs for the unemployed.[10]

A variety of religious groups also provided aid to impoverished co-religionists. New York City had been a religiously diverse society since its foundation. Immigrants from various parts of Europe had flocked to Manhattan Island, attracted equally by the hope of economic opportunity and the open atmosphere of religious toleration established by the Dutch and later continued by the English. As more men and women settled in the city, they brought with them a variety of religious allegiances including branches of Protestantism, Catholicism and Judaism. All of these groups found ways to support the poor within their congregations. The Dutch Reformed and Quaker churches, for instance, provided relief to poor congregants, often keeping them off the

---

[8] Mohl, 42-44; Cray, 45; Bridenbaugh, 397; Schneider, 65-68.
[9] Bridenbaugh, 397.
[10] Mohl, 48-50.

city's welfare rolls. Shearith Israel, the only Jewish synagogue in the city, also created a very successful charitable network for Jews in the community.[11]

The combined system of "outdoor" and "indoor" municipal relief coupled with private charity remained in effect until the British invasion and occupation of New York City in September 1776. When the British evacuated the city in 1784, the new city government simply re-established the pre-Revolutionary system of poor relief. City officials would find, however, that these old measures were no longer sufficient to meet the needs of the growing pauper population in the new Republic.

Poverty and Public Poor Relief After the Revolution

Over the course of the American Revolution, death and illness had touched almost every family in New York. Two great fires, in 1776 and 1778 respectively, had left almost a quarter of the city in charred ruins.[12] After the British evacuated the city in 1783 thousands of refugees who had been living in the countryside began returning, often only to find their homes in shambles and their livelihoods gone. To compound their misery, the city government was demanding back taxes on their property. In a 1784 petition to the New York City's Common Council, David Barclay described his family's dire situation upon returning to the city after eight years of living in the New York countryside. Not only had he and his family been "rendered so poor by the distresses of the war," but both the American and British armies had also occupied his

[11] Mohl, 49; Cray, 38; Bridenbaugh, 237.
[12] Sidney I. Pomerantz, *New York: An American City, 1783-1803* (Port Washington: Ira J. Friedman, Inc., 1965), 19-20.

home at various points during the war. "The house has been so much abused," he complained, "that it is not tenantable." Barclay requested that the Common Council have sympathy for his situation and provide him some relief in the taxes he owed to the city corporation. Distressed widows also petitioned the city for rent relief upon return to their homes. In Ann Aveson's case, she became impoverished once her Continental currency fell in value. Claiming that she had been "well attached to the American cause" and "to the liberties of her country," she pleaded for lenience from the Council. Another widow, Margaret Birmingham, had lost her husband in the war and could not support herself because she was now lame and "unable to work."[13] Even after New York recovered from the immediate effects of the Revolutionary War, economic downturns, the embargo, the War of 1812, and several epidemics guaranteed the permanence of a large underclass of impoverished men and women in the city throughout the Early National Period.

It is difficult to ascertain the exact number of impoverished persons in the city at any given time. What scholars have found, however, is that the number of poor increased with the growth of the general population, often peaking in times of economic crisis. In 1798, 636 persons resided in the city almshouse. By 1816, that number would rise to 1,525. These figures, however, only reflect the number of individuals whose circumstances were desperate enough to force them into the municipal poorhouse. Other statistics demonstrate that many more people were living in destitution outside of the almshouse. The New York City health commissioners supported 2,400 poor men

[13] Petition of David Barclay, February 13, 1784,Common Council Papers, New York Municipal Archives; Petition of Ann Aveson, 1784, Common Council Papers, New York Municipal Archives; Petition of Margaret Birmingham, 1784, Common Council Papers, New York Municipal Archives.

and women during the yellow fever outbreak of 1798. In 1805, another outbreak combined with a harsh winter would raise the number of indigent New Yorkers to 10,000.[14] Poverty was both a systemic and a recurring problem in Early National New York City.

It is also difficult to find a great deal of information about the lives of individual poor men and women in New York. Transients and migrant workers did not leave many records behind, city directories did not list the names of the poor, and few primary sources from the point of view of poor men and women exist. Nevertheless, historians can identify a number of specific categories into which the poor fell. Those who applied for city or private relief were the traditional groups of "impotent" poor: widows, orphans, the elderly, sick and disabled. The "working poor" was another category, made up of able-bodied men and women who for a variety of reasons could not find stable employment. Many immigrants fell into this category as did unskilled and day laborers whose low wages and intermittent work kept them on the edge of subsistence.[15]

The promise of employment combined with liberal immigration policies made the city an attractive destination to immigrants and domestic migrants, but their presence often added to the poor's numbers. Unfortunately, many people failed to find jobs once they arrived and had to resort to living in the almshouse with their families. Scholars have found that 30-40% of almshouse residents were foreign born, coming from European countries such as England, Ireland, the Netherlands and France. A good

[14] Mohl, 86, 17.
[15] Ibid., 21-29.

number also came from Africa or the West Indies.[16] Almshouse records reveal that a large number of immigrants had come to rely on this institution for survival. In 1796, the commissioners of the Almshouse reported an increased number of immigrants in their institution. The report expressed alarm over the "prodigious influx of indigent foreigners." Of the 770 paupers in the almshouse, only 258 had been born in New York while 512 had come from Europe, Africa and other parts of America. The largest number in this group was the Irish, whose number totaled 148. Many had arrived by ship "destitute and emaciated," forced to live "huddling together in cellar and sheds" as well as in the shipyards.[17] In the case of this particular report, the commissioners were hoping to draw public attention to an increase in immigration and to ask the municipal government for increased financial assistance in this time of crisis.

Widows as a group also made up a large number of the city's impoverished residents. Early National New York City was not an easy place to live for any of the poor, but women who lost their husbands faced a more precarious situation than other classes of indigents. Without the income of a spouse, many women—whether from working- or middle-class backgrounds—risked a rapid descent into poverty.[18] Since many widows were already living on the margins of society even in prosperous times, they suffered disproportionately from depressions and stoppages in commerce. Many of the petitions to the Common Council were from widows pleading for financial assistance. In 1812, Leah Day, a widow with four children, asked the city government to help her pay the rent on her ground lot. A fire, depriving her of all of her furniture

[16] Cray, 170-174.
[17] Report by the Commissioners of the Almshouse and Bridewell, February 8, 1796, Common Council Papers, New York Municipal Archives.
[18] Stansell, 12.

and cash, had recently destroyed her house. To make matters worse, she implied that the loss of her house meant that she could no longer earn income from boarders. Until now, she had relied on the charity of friends, but she hoped that the city could provide support as well. Unfortunately, the Council's "Committee of Charity" denied her request on the grounds that Day's "pecuniary circumstances" were not dire enough to warrant aid.[19] Many widows asked highly regarded men in the city to petition for them in the hopes that a bequest from a "respectable gentleman" would improve their chances with the municipal government. In 1813, two men, James Dougherty and James Douglass, petitioned the Common Council on behalf of Rose Campbell, whom they avowed was an "honest and industrious woman" deserving of the city's attention.[20]

Numbers of free Black men and women also experienced poverty. The free Black population of New York City increased rapidly after the American Revolution because of increasing economic opportunities and the state's general emancipation laws. At 8.1 %, the free Black share of the population made New York City the most important Black urban center in nineteenth-century America. Many freedmen and women could make a livelihood as laborers, artisans and professionals, but large numbers of others lived marginal existences. Unskilled Black women, in particular, often resorted to selling goods in the street, doing laundry or engaging in prostitution.[21] Very few free Blacks, however, became residents in the almshouse. In 1806 only five percent of the almshouse population consisted of free Black men and women. The cohesiveness of the Black community in New York was the main reason for this

[19] Petition of Leah Day, March 30, 1812, Common Council Papers, New York Municipal Archives; Report of the Committee of Charity, April 20, 1812, Common Council Papers, New York Municipal Archives.
[20] Petition of Rose Campbell, June 21, 1813, Common Council Papers, New York Municipal Archives.
[21] White, 153, 159-162, 165.

statistic. Neighbors, family members, churches and mutual aid societies provided many poor Black men and women with support, allowing them to escape life under municipal care.[22]

The city government continued to take the lead in poor relief distribution in the years immediately following the American Revolution. One of the first orders of business of the city government after returning to the city in 1784 was to cope with the thousands of displaced and impoverished residents. At a meeting of the Common Council in February of that year, the mayor and aldermen resolved to establish an official committee to "report an estimate of the sum necessary to be raised for the support of the poor."[23] The Common Council abolished the old "overseers of the poor" and replaced them with "commissioners." At the same time, the disestablishment of the Anglican Church during the Revolution meant that the new system would be purely secular in nature.

This new system was not very effective at relieving the suffering of the poor, however, because the new commissioners emphasized restricting the right of settlement through removal of the poor rather than relief. Local governments were only responsible for providing poor relief to the *legal* residents of their region and could "remove" anyone who had immigrated from another state or city. By denying many of the poor "settlement" rights and claiming that other states or towns should instead provide for them, New York City's government was in essence freeing itself from the financial burden of supporting thousands of men and women. One of the many problems with this tactic was that the Common Council spent more time and energy

---

[22] Cray, 191.
[23] Minutes and Proceedings, February 1784, Common Council Papers, New York Municipal Archives.

searching out and removing the "non-resident" poor from the city than in distributing cash and other necessities to distressed individuals—even to those who *were* residents. As a result, the municipal relief system became what one historian called a "harsh," "ineffective" and even "irrelevant" institution that could not keep up with the growing numbers of impoverished men and women in the city.[24]

The almshouse played a central role within the municipal system. The purpose of the almshouse was to provide food and shelter to paupers who could no longer survive on outdoor relief. Many of the residents were sick or disabled and the government eventually hired physicians to provide them with medical attention. Unfortunately, this institution proved inadequate for relieving the vastly increased numbers of paupers for much of the Early National Period. Both the original building, which dated from the colonial era, and its three-story replacement (opened in 1797) proved to be too small. Three years later in 1800 the Common Council tried to make the almshouse more efficient by creating a new position to oversee the running of the institution—the Superintendent of the Almshouse and Bridewell—but the numbers of poor continued to outpace municipal resources. It was not until 1816 that the city opened Bellevue, a large almshouse complex that was sufficient to house thousands of men and women.[25]

The almshouse eventually became the center for distributing outdoor relief as well. The records of the superintendent and commissioners demonstrate that the institution provided cash and fuel to many poor men and women outside of its walls. In January 1791, the commissioners of the Almshouse and Bridewell supplied twenty-six

---

[24] Mohl, 54-55, 60-64.
[25] Ibid., 75, 81-85.

cords of wood to 223 families, the majority of whom were located in the poorer wards of the city.[26] From May 1806 to February 1807, the superintendent distributed a variety of other goods to the outdoor poor, including wood, coffins and clothing valued at £2,845.[27] The almshouse system, however, possessed serious shortcomings. For one, the institution's budget skyrocketed as more and more impoverished immigrants and displaced workers placed demands on its resources. In the fiscal year 1785-86, the almshouse reported £5,017 in expenditures. Ten years later in 1795-96, that number more than doubled, reaching £11,694.[28] Although the new almshouse at Bellevue in 1816 solved some of the overcrowding issues faced by the old almshouse, the city could never completely keep up with the growing numbers of paupers in its midst. Immigration, harsh winters, epidemics, and economic fluctuations kept expenditures high and strained the city's financial resources.[29]

The limitations of municipal relief prompted a number of the city's elite to establish private organizations to assist in the growing fight against poverty. Initially, the founders of benevolent organizations saw themselves as supplementing municipal efforts and often requested city and state financial support for their projects. Their demands, however, often led to tension between the private charities and a municipal government that was reluctant or unable to distribute its scarce funds to the organizations. Over time, the burden of poor relief would shift in favor of the private

---

[26] A Return of Wood Dispersed Among the Poor of the City of New York by the Commissioners of the Almshouse and Bridewell by the Order of the Corporation, January 12, 1791, Common Council Papers, New York Municipal Archives.
[27] Report from the Superintendent of the Almshouse, February 2, 1807, Common Council Papers, New York Municipal Archives.
[28] Mohl, 91.
[29] Cray, 134-135.

charities, but the line between private charity and public aid would never be sharply drawn in the Early National Period.

The Rise of Private Benevolence

At first, private benevolence was little more than various individuals organized informally to address the needs of the poor in a general way. In February 1784, a group of citizens placed an announcement in the *New York Packet* urging the "Charitable Inhabitants of New York" to help them provide food and other items to poor families. This advertisement claimed that the group had already aided over four hundred families in the city, including one hundred fifty widows with young children. Readers were asked to organize similar collections to aid families in need of assistance, estimated to number over six hundred.[30] That same month a number of churches collected donations for the poor at the bequest of the Common Council and distributed the cash to needy members of the community.[31] New York City's mayor, James Duane, encouraged local clergymen to preach charity sermons for the poor. John Rodgers gladly complied, preaching a charity sermon on Sunday, December 14, 1783, at St. Paul's and eventually publishing his earlier Thanksgiving Day sermon, *The Divine Goodness Displayed in the American Revolution*, in order to donate the royalties from its sales to the poor.[32]

---

[30] *New York Packet*, February 16, 1784.
[31] Minutes and Proceedings, February 16, 1784, Common Council Papers, New York Municipal Archives.
[32] Edward P. Alexander, *A Revolutionary Conservative: James Duane of New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938), 160; *New York Packet*, December 11, 1783; *New York Packet*, February 19, 1784.

Heeding his own admonitions to help the poor, Rodgers took the lead in creating private charitable organizations that would address poverty on a more permanent basis. With the collaboration of a number of the city's ministers and members of its social and economic elite, he would create a dense network of benevolent societies that became a vital source of relief to the city's poor. These societies concentrated their efforts on both the "traditional" categories of the "worthy" poor including orphans, widows, the sick and the elderly and on the "able-bodied" or "working" poor, who had been considered "unworthy" of aid in the colonial era.

The work of the new benevolent organizations was shaped by two important developments in Early National New York. First, the disestablishment of the Anglican Church in New York allowed other, predominantly Calvinist, denominations, particularly the Presbyterians and Dutch Reformed, to take the lead in benevolence and craft poor relief practices according to Reformed theology. Second, the early charities received a powerful impetus from the increasing acceptance of the notion that the United States was a special nation, blessed by God and assigned a prominent place in a larger mission to spread both Christianity and democracy. Calvinism and nationalism, separately and combined, would shape the ways in which these new organizations defined the problem of poverty and devised relief practices. In turn, these new attitudes and policies would significantly change the nature of poor relief in both the public and private sectors.

A number of trends and developments in New York Protestantism in general influenced the nature of benevolence. Religious pluralism, in particular, would play a significant role in the development of benevolent societies, obliging them to become

interdenominational and ecumenical in nature, at least when it came to uniting the various Protestant organizations in a common effort. Early National New York was a diverse city—ethnically, racially, linguistically and religiously. New England minister and Yale president Timothy Dwight, who published a four-volume narrative of his travels in the United States, noted that "when passing through the streets, you will hear English, French, Dutch and German, and all the various brogues spoken by the numerous nations mentioned above."[33] French traveler Moreau de St. Méry similarly observed in 1794 that New York held twenty-two "houses of worship," including the Jewish temple, Shearith Israel, and one Roman Catholic parish.[34] Each year, that number of churches increased. Dwight discovered fifty-five during his visit in 1811 and speculated "in proportion to its size," New York " is not improbably a more religious city than any other in the world." Church attendance was high each Sunday, in his opinion, especially when "the weather is tolerably pleasant."[35] By 1825, the number of individual congregations had reached ninety-three.[36]

This coexistence of Catholics, Jews and a host of Protestants of various denominations created a unique religious atmosphere that facilitated ecumenical cooperation and imitation. Despite recurring conflicts and competition among the various sects, the very existence of religious pluralism forced many churches in the colonial era to presume that the best method of survival was cooperation.[37] As a result,

---

[33] Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York*, ed. Barbara Miller Solomon (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969), 331-332.
[34] *Moreau de St. Méry's American Journey*, trans. Kenneth Roberts and Anna M. Roberts (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1947), 149-150.
[35] Dwight, 331.
[36] Rock, 316.
[37] Richard W. Pointer, *Protestant Pluralism and the New York Experience: A Study of Eighteenth-Century Religious Diversity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 30-33. For a different perspective,

religious benevolence after the Revolution quickly became an ecumenical venture as most societies drew members from a variety of Protestant congregations: Presbyterian, Dutch Reformed and Episcopalian (formerly Anglican), to name a few.

The Anglican Church's status as the official, state-sponsored church in New York City had ended once the United States declared independence from Great Britain. The New York Constitution of 1777 along with a series of 1784 laws provided all denominations in the state with equal legal status.[38] This development had two effects on the rise of benevolent organizations: First, disestablishment placed "dissenting" denominations—Presbyterians and Dutch Reformed in particular—on an equal footing with other churches, allowing them to unite and engage in widespread social reform. Now that an established denomination could no longer depend on state support, it was in the best interests of *all* Protestants to cooperate in their plans to spread religion and reduce problems such as poverty.[39] Rev. Rodgers, a Presbyterian, urged a spirit of cooperation in his *Divine Goodness Displayed in the American Revolution.* Acknowledging that "religious distinctions" would "unavoidably take place among the disciples of our common Lord," he urged his listeners to put aside these differences to work for the greater public good. "It is not to be expected, that we should all be united in *opinion*," he declared, "but we may be all united in *affection.*"[40]

The separation of church and state in New York also freed the state and city governments from their previous obligation as "moral guardians" of society. Public

---

see John Webb Pratt, *Religion, Politics, and Diversity: The Church-State Theme in New York History.* Pratt argues that more often than not, pluralism fostered competition and conflict among the various sects.

[38] Pointer, 104; John Webb Pratt, *Religion, Politics, and Diversity: The Church-State Theme in New York History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 100-103.

[39] Fred J. Hood, *Reformed America: The Middle and Southern States, 1783-1837* (University: The University of Alabama Press, 1980), 57.

[40] Rodgers, 35-36.

officials were only too glad to relinquish their moral responsibilities because they had enough to do providing and maintaining municipal amenities on a limited budget in an unstable economy. They certainly felt the financial pinch as they attempted to maintain social order. As a result, private groups, rather than civil authorities, would bear the primary responsibility for the moral and spiritual welfare of the people. Benevolent societies, in particular, would now take on this role by adding moral and religious reform campaigns to their poor relief efforts.[41]

Reformers, however, still believed that the government was obliged to support their efforts. Most members of benevolent societies argued that just because the state no longer served as the patron of a particular faith did not mean that it did not still have a duty to promote religion generally. Most members would have agreed that the official religion of the newly established United States should be a generalized form of Protestantism, comprehending all the various denominations and enjoying to some degree the patronage of the government. Benevolent organizations frequently petitioned state and city governments for financial assistance. The civil governments, however, did not always support benevolent organizations to the satisfaction of reformers.[42]

The Second Great Awakening, a series of religious revivals that began in New England at the end of the eighteenth century and spread throughout the United States well into the 1830s, also influenced the nature of benevolence. Mark Noll has called the Second Great Awaking "the most influential revival of Christianity in the history of

---

[41] Hood, 114-116; George M. Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience: A Case Study of Thought and Theology in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 12-14; Pratt, 204; Pointer, 133-137.
[42] Pratt, 204-205; Pointer, 138; Hood, 53, 56-57.

the United States" because of its longevity and the numbers of people affected by it. An important consequence of the revivals was the creation of private organizations to evangelize and reform the new nation. Such voluntary organizations, including the benevolent societies, carried on the revivals and created permanent evangelical institutions ambitious enough to aim at creating a Christian nation at home and converting the rest of the world to their brand of evangelical Protestantism.[43]

Religious life in New York between 1800 and 1820 was dominated by a series of revivals that were both complex and varied in their nature, as they were elsewhere in the new nation in the same time period. Among some congregations the revivals resembled the outdoor gatherings that characterized those on the American frontier. Preachers such as Johny Edwards, Dorothy Ripley and Amos Broad appealed to New York's artisan class with large outdoor revivals deemed "disorderly" and even "fanatical" by middle-class onlookers. Baptist congregations hosted their own revivals in public, often holding baptismal immersions off the wharves of Corlear's Hook, a working-class neighborhood on the waterfront. The impact of revivalism on middle-class Calvinists in New York City, however, took on very different characteristics. Reformed clergy and congregants—that is, the Calvinist sects—often scoffed at the emotional and public revivals of the artisan class, preferring more serene and "dignified" methods of reviving religion. They emphasized appealing to human reason as well as to the emotions.[44]

---

[43] Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 166-169; Mark A. Noll, *The Old Religion in a New World: The History of North American Christianity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 67-68; Rosenberg, 49.
[44] Hood, 3.

The Reformed churches were a diverse group including Presbyterians, members of the Dutch and German Reformed churches, Baptists, and a number of smaller denominations. Reformed Christians came from a variety of countries including England, Scotland, Holland and parts of Germany and adhered to a number of national confessions, such as the Westminster and Heidelberg Confessions. Some Reformed denominations were evangelical; others were not. Some were conservative; others were "progressive." All, however, could trace their roots to a European pietism which emphasized individual spiritual renewal and revival.[45] Although many Reformed churches were represented in the membership rolls of the benevolent societies, Presbyterians and members of the Dutch Reformed Church made up the majority of the organizations' leadership. Most Presbyterians, including John Rodgers, were part of the Presbyterian Church of the United States, the largest of the Presbyterian sects. The Associate Reformed Church, a small splinter group of the Presbyterians in Scotland, would also play a large role in the early benevolent societies. Many non-Calvinists including Episcopalians, Methodists and Quakers joined benevolent organizations and donated money to these charities, but the Calvinist doctrines of the Reformed members served as the motor force behind the societies' actions.

In general terms, Calvinist theology emphasized the sovereignty of God, the total depravity of humanity, redemption in Christ, and the doctrine of sanctification. Because God is sovereign and human beings depraved, Calvinists argued that redemption could only be brought about through God's power; humans were powerless

[45] Paul K. Conkin, *The Uneasy Center: Reformed Christianity in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), xi-xiii; George M. Marsden, "Introduction: Reformed and American," in *Reformed Theology in America: A History of Its Modern Development*, ed. David F. Wells (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 1; Noll, *A History of Christianity*, 69-71.

to achieve their own salvation. Salvation was part of God's divine plan and through his omniscience, he had predestined some people for redemption and others for damnation. The predestined group, known as the elect, had been chosen before the creation of the earth and would be the group to receive God's grace as a result of Christ's sacrifice. The non-elect, in contrast, would be denied salvation and grace. The doctrine of human depravity, however, meant that even the elect could not achieve righteousness on their own. They needed Christ to act on their behalf. Once redeemed, the sinner could progress toward holy living, or sanctification. According to Calvinists, this journey to holiness was a life-long pursuit. The elect would continue to sin throughout their lives, but slowly they would be able to do good works in the right spirit and worship God with an appropriate sense of gratitude and love.[46]

The Calvinist churches shared a common dogmatic profession, but regional and situational differences often led to variations in the practice and application of these principles. The Reformed theology found in the mid-Atlantic states, for instance, was unique. Unlike the Congregationalists, the established church in most New England colonies, Calvinist sects in New York were dissenters in the decades of the Anglican establishment. Presbyterians and Dutch Reformed in New York often railed against the inequities of their status and bonded together in opposition to the Anglican establishment. One historian notes that for them, disestablishment was an empowering experience, but because of their experience as dissenters in a pluralistic environment,

[46] Randall Balmer and John R. Fitzmier, *The Presbyterians* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1933), 5-12.

New York Calvinists would tackle the perceived connection between poverty and "irreligion" in a unique way.[47]

Reformed theology in the mid-Atlantic states was also distinctive in its incorporation of Scottish moral (or "Common Sense") philosophy. Building upon the Enlightenment's insistence on human rationality, Common Sense philosophers taught that God worked through discernable natural laws and that knowledge of these laws could be used to promote morality, political stability and social order. Common Sense philosophy was largely optimistic as it argued that people could be drawn to religion through reason and logic. Immigrating Reformed clergy brought this philosophy to America from Scotland, while Princeton, which trained many of the Presbyterian clergy who would serve in New York's pulpits in the Early National Period, incorporated this line of thought into its curriculum.[48]

This emphasis on reason particularly affected New York Calvinists' interpretation of providence. Traditionally, providence is the belief that the Judeo-Christian God is the supreme governor of the universe, and as a result, he directly controls the actions and destiny of human beings. Men's and women's futures—and the future of nations, in general—have already been planned by an omniscient God. Common Sense philosophy and its emphasis on reason, however, argued that God's providence is *rational*. It is not arbitrary or unnecessarily cruel but instead follows natural and predictable laws. A human being may suffer in this world, but that suffering is not necessarily the punishment of a vengeful God. Rather, the pain

[47] Hood, 2-3.
[48] Noll, *A History of Christianity*, 154-157; Mark A. Noll, "Revival, Enlightenment, Civic Humanism, and the Evolution of Calvinism in Scotland and America, 1735-1843," in *Amazing Grace: Evangelicalism in Australia, Britain, Canada and the United States*, ed. George A. Rawlyk and Mark A. Noll (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), 86-87; Hood, 27-28.

experienced by individual humans—however seemingly senseless—is part of a grander plan for the general good.[49]

This insertion of a rational, benevolent deity into Calvinist providential theology radically changed many New Yorkers' attitudes about poverty. Traditionally, Calvinists had argued that poverty was inevitable and sanctioned by God. Those who found themselves impoverished could console themselves only with the knowledge that their suffering was necessary to fulfill the divine plan. At the same time, it was the responsibility of those with wealth to help those less fortunate. Need and charity were reciprocal; both were necessary for society to operate properly and each group, rich no less than poor, depended on one another. Within this system, the poor could display the virtues of patience and gratitude while the rich could practice virtues such as charity and stewardship.[50]

Calvinists who adopted a more rational approach to providence, however, continued to believe that this arrangement between the rich and poor benefited society, but now also held that God did not arbitrarily sentence some people to indigence and others to prosperity. Instead, the poor bore some responsibility for their social condition. Their own laziness or a lack of frugality, not God's capriciousness, was to blame.[51] This did not mean that Calvinists were now arguing that the poor should be left alone to die. It was still the moral responsibility of wealthier individuals to help the poor by providing them with material relief and moral instruction. A sense of noblesse oblige would still be in effect and the symbiotic relationship between these two groups

[49] Hood, 27-28.
[50] Ibid., 42-43.
[51] Ibid., 42.

would remain intact. But now the reformers could hold the more optimistic view that the condition of the poor could ultimately be changed for the better. My research has found that benevolence now went beyond mere relief of suffering, important as that was, and could be directed toward the eradication of poverty.

The second factor that influenced the nature of New York's benevolence movement was nationalism, whether it was a more general sense of *republican* nationalism that sought to protect the new American Republic or a localized emphasis on *civic* nationalism that emphasized loyalty to New York City. In both cases, nationalism worked in conjunction with the reformers' sense of religious duty and dedication. Both senses of duty, the piety owed to God and the civic duties and patriotic obligations owed to New York and the United States, held the optimistic view that the lives of the poor—and the health of society in general—could be improved. The belief that the United States could create a superior society free from the political oppression, religious intolerance, and excessive poverty of Europe convinced many New Yorkers to join voluntary societies aimed at promoting these ends in their own city. In *Divine Goodness Displayed in the American Revolution*, Rodgers claimed that the United States' superiority stemmed from divine blessings. "We are hereby put in possession of a most extensive, and fertile territory," he declared, "abounding with every article, necessary for the support or conveniency of its inhabitants." Moreover, God had "put all the blessings of liberty, civil and religious, within our reach." Americans needed to beware, however, that these blessings were not guaranteed:

republican governments were especially vulnerable to communal vices, which could "sap the foundation of our privileges sooner or later."[52]

Dewitt Clinton, then mayor of New York City and a member of several benevolent organizations, similarly praised the institutions and values of the United States as superior to those of Europe. In an address to the New York Free School Society, an organization aimed at creating schools for the city's poor children, he claimed that the United States, and New York City in particular, led the way in creating a model society. One of the many mistakes of European countries, especially Great Britain, had been to "confine knowledge to the wealthy and the great" while neglecting the education of the "humble and depressed." The unique situation of the United States, however, allowed it to escape this fate: "Here, no privileged orders—no factitious distinctions in society—no hereditary nobility—no established religion—no royal prerogatives exist, to interpose barriers between people." As a result, many states, including New York, had established sophisticated educational institutions for all residents—including the poor. "In those states," he claimed, "it is as uncommon to find a poor man who cannot read and write, as it is rare to see one in Europe who can." He argued that the importance of this education lay in its ability to inculcate morality, preventing the children of the poor from falling into the same cycle of indigence as their parents. The end result would be the creation of a unique American society with few paupers and more productive citizens.[53]

---

[52] Rodgers, 31,37,41.

[53] DeWitt Clinton, *An Address to the Benefactors and Friends of the Free School Society of New York, Delivered on the Opening of that Institution, in Their New and Spacious Building, on the Eleventh of the Twelfth Month 1809* (New York, 1810), 3,5.

Both Calvinism and nationalism worked together to shape benevolence in Early National New York City. American Calvinist doctrine held that the wealthy had a *patriotic* duty to help the poor. American Calvinists shared the idea that the United States had a special place in God's plans for the world. They argued that God had chosen the United States specifically to guide the world in the ways of piety and prosperity, but a large underclass of poor did not fit into this scenario. As a result, it was both a religious and national duty of the wealthy to lift the poor out of their indigence as a means of improving the nation as a whole.

The Influence of British Voluntarism

Charitable institutions aimed at relieving poverty in Europe abounded at this time and often served as models for benevolent organizations across the Atlantic. Peter Clark, in *British Clubs and Societies, 1580-1800*, studies the origins and impact of what he calls the "associational world," a network of voluntary societies in preindustrial Britain. These societies emerged between 1760 and 1800 to address a number of social issues, including poverty. Elites, whether in London or other parts of the English-speaking world, organized private associations to bring order and stability to their communities, which they considered to be under attack by crime, prostitution, poverty and illness. The social upheaval caused by increased urbanization, war and economic turmoil were all factors that spurred the members of these organizations to action. The religious revivals of the Methodists, Anglicans and Baptists at the end of the eighteenth

century combined with the political and social reforms of the American and French Revolutions also created a climate that encouraged the rise of voluntarism.[54]

One of the most important voluntary societies to emerge in Britain at the end of the eighteenth century was the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor, founded in 1796. This society combined campaigns for moral reform with charity and raised relief funds for the destitute. A growing concern among the upper echelon of British society over the dependency of the poor motivated this organization. The founders hoped to decrease dependency by encouraging the poor to lift themselves out of poverty through cultivating habits of industry and frugality. One of the main purposes of the society was therefore to discourage the poor from relying on parish aid and thus becoming long-term dependents on the local welfare system.[55] New York benevolent societies would adopt this tactic of combining poor relief with moral reform. Like their British counterparts, elite New Yorkers feared that if urban poverty went unchecked, it would result in increased dependency and social instability.

American philanthropists and reformers were also familiar with a group of British evangelical philanthropists known as the "Clapham Sect." This group, led by such philanthropists as William Wilberforce and Hannah More, organized voluntary societies to address a variety of issues including the abolition of the slave trade, education for women, moral reform and abolishing poverty, including the Society for

---

[54] Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies, 1580-1800: The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 95-98.

[55] Clark, 106; Samantha Williams, "A Good Character for Virtue, Sobriety, and Honesty: Unmarried Mothers' Petitions to the London Foundling Hospital and the Rhetoric of Need in the Early Nineteenth Century," in *Illegitimacy in Britain, 1700-1920*, ed. Alysa Levene, Thomas Nutt and Samantha Williams (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 90; Joanna Innes, "The 'Mixed Economy of Welfare' in Early Modern England: Assessments of the Options from Halle to Malthus," in *Charity, Self-Interest and Welfare in the English Past*, ed. Martin Daunton (London: UCL Press Limited, 1996), 146.

Bettering the Condition of the Poor. The Clapham Sect hoped that the strict morality and discipline of their societies would lead to greater social and political stability. If the poor—and the country in general—could eschew ignorance, irreligion and immorality, Britain would become a greater nation morally, economically and politically. Wilberforce and More's publications made their way across the Atlantic and were published by American printers. In More's case, 133 religious and moral tracts were reproduced by American Methodist, Episcopalian and Presbyterian societies between 1774 and 1832.[56] New York philanthropists were very familiar with these writings and incorporated their ideas about poverty and morality into their own benevolent organizations.

Conclusion

The first attempts to address poverty through religious and patriotic aims in New York City began almost immediately after the American Revolution as thousands of refugees returned from the countryside to rebuild their city. The charitable societies that emerged at this time fell under what I call the "first wave of benevolence," a movement which focused on combining moral reform campaigns with the distribution of material relief to address the immediate needs of starving, sick and unemployed men, women and children. These societies, which will be discussed in Chapter Two, marked a radical shift in poor relief policy by emphasizing the use of private, rather than public,

[56] Ted A. Campbell, "Evangelical Institutionalism and Evangelical Sectarianism in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain and America," in *Amazing Grace: Evangelicalism in Australia, Britain, Canada and the United States*, ed. George A. Rawlyk and Mark A. Noll (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), 116-121; Rosenberg, 51.

institutions in the fight against poverty. The optimistic nature of nationalism and a revised, more rational form of Calvinism would play a large role in shaping the nature of these early organizations.

CHAPTER II

"TO RAISE THE POOR BY SORROW BOW'D": DIRECT RELIEF AND THE FIRST WAVE OF BENEVOLENCE

In April 1800 Isabella Graham, First Directress of the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children, stood before a large gathering of the society's members at the City Hotel on Broadway. "Alas for her! The new made widow," she cried. "For her the approach of winter is the approach of death." Graham and the women of her audience were well aware that many of the city's widows faced a perilous future. Lacking the income from a husband's labor, such women often resorted to begging in the streets or were forced to remove with their children to the damp, crowded municipal almshouse. Graham assured her listeners that their donations would spare New York City's widows from this fate: "Some sister widow, pensioner on your bounty, consoles her with the news, that many benevolent hearts have united their efforts to relieve wants like hers." The women who gathered at the City Hotel had organized the society only three years earlier in 1797. By the time of Graham's address, the society could boast 142 widows and over four hundred children under the age of twelve on its books. The Society's goal was to rescue these families from the direst forms of deprivation and, over time, to equip them with the necessary tools to become self-sufficient members of the community. [1]

---

[1] *The Power of Faith: Exemplified in the Life and Writings of the Late Mrs. Isabella Graham of New York* (New York, 1816), 395-97.

The Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children (SRPW) was one of the first benevolent societies in New York City to be organized on non-denominational grounds and dedicated solely to assisting the poor. The SRPW, along with the Humane Society, the Christian Benevolent Society, the Assistance Society, the Orphan Asylum Society, and the Association for the Relief of Respectable, Aged, Indigent Females, assisted discrete groups of the poor such as widows, orphans and the elderly—all of whom were considered "worthy" of aid. Organized and administered by the upper and middle classes, such societies comprised the first wave of benevolence in Early National New York City, charitable organizations that focused primarily on distributing emergency relief in the form of food, fuel, clothing and other provisions.

Early organizations did not emphasize proselytization as later societies for aiding the poor would do after 1812, but their members were still deeply motivated by religious concerns. They stressed at all times the importance of providing their pensioners with proper religious and moral "instruction" and relied upon traditional Protestant social thought to define the problem of poverty and justify their own efforts. In addition, as citizens of a new nation, they were eager to create a stable and prosperous republic. Founders of benevolent organizations wanted to establish a community unmarred by the obvious signs of poverty—i.e., street begging and overcrowded almshouses—while training up the able-bodied poor to become useful laborers in New York's commercial economy. Ultimately, this combined sense of religious and national duty convinced early reformers that their efforts would transform the indigent into "virtuous" and "useful" citizens who would benefit, not burden, their emerging republican society.

The appearance of the first wave of benevolence at the end of the eighteenth century marks an important shift in New York City's poor relief policy. Previously, New Yorkers had relied on municipal agencies such as the almshouse to care for the poor, but the devastation of the war of the Revolution combined with subsequent economic calamities found these institutions unable to cope with the rising numbers of paupers. An increasing number of charities, including the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows, emerged to meet these emergencies and continued to distribute relief even after the crises had abated. As New York City entered the nineteenth century such charities continued to expand and grow in number. In the Early National Period a combination of public and private institutions would attempt to alleviate the effects of poverty in the city, with more and more emphasis placed on these private interdenominational endeavors.

The Origins of the First Wave of Benevolence

The proliferation of relief organizations in New York between 1787 and 1814 was a response to the increasing number of poor in the city. In most cases, these societies directed their efforts to helping identifiable groups of "worthy" poor or to addressing particular crises. In 1787, for instance, the Society for the Relief of Distressed Debtors (known as the Humane Society of New York after 1803) was founded to help the increasing numbers of debtors languishing in the city jail. Its original goal was to provide the prisoners with food, fuel, clothing, and in some cases legal aid, and in 1802, its members expanded the function of the society by establishing

a soup kitchen to feed the poor "on occasions of public calamity." On one such occasion, the "Soup House" proved especially effective in providing for the poor when a yellow fever epidemic struck the city in 1803.[2]

The Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children (SRPW) and its offshoot, the Orphan Asylum Society (OAS), are particularly well-documented organizations. In December 1797, the miseries of an especially brutal winter had moved a group of middle- and upper-class women to create the SRPW in order to aid the most vulnerable residents of the community. Nine years later, these same women established the OAS to care for the orphaned children of their deceased "pensioners," or clients. According to a well-known and often-told story, Sarah Hoffman of the SRPW conceived of the idea of an orphan society after visiting a family of five orphans whose mother died in the yellow fever epidemic of 1805. Since the widows' society was unable to provide for these children after their mother's death, Hoffman and others left the SRPW to form a separate organization. Eventually, the OAS would build an asylum for these children and for other orphans they found in the almshouse or fending for themselves on the city's streets.[3]

The War of 1812 created new difficulties for the poor. Although the land fighting never reached the city, the British naval blockade severely disrupted commerce in the port of New York, leading to widespread shortages and unemployment.[4] As a result, the Association for the Relief of Respectable, Aged, Indigent Females (ARAIF)

---

[2] *A Sketch of the Origin and Progress of the Humane Society of the City of New York Together with the Act of Incorporation and By-Laws* (New York, 1814), 1-5.
[3] "History of the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children," in *New York Missionary Magazine and Repository of Religious Intelligence* (New York, 1803), 4; John Stanford, *Composure in Death. A Discourse Delivered in the Orphan Asylum, New York, on the Death of Mrs. Sarah Hoffman, First Directress of the Institution* (New York, 1821), 31-32.
[4] Mohl, 113-114.

was formed in 1814 to assist poor women suffering under "the infirmities of old age." A series of harsh winters combined with the "calamities of war" had driven many of these women into poverty and convinced ARAIF's founders that a new charitable institution was necessary in order to meet the unique needs of this group. The nature of this society and its pensioners will be discussed in more detail later; here, however, it is important to point out that ARAIF distributed aid to a very carefully defined group of poor women—not only were pensioners required to be above the age of sixty but they also had to fit the subjective category of "respectable." Despite the urgency of the situation in the final year of the war, this was by no means an organization that indiscriminately distributed relief to all of the impoverished victims of war-time disaster.[5]

Two other groups—the Christian Benevolent Society (1804) and the Assistance Society for Relieving and Advising Sick and Poor Persons in the City of New York (1808)—were founded in the same period, but in many ways they were exceptions to the rule. The founders of these societies organized their charities in response to the rise of illness and poverty in the city, but their policies applied to a much more broadly defined category of poor. Instead of targeting a specific group in the fashion of the Humane Society and the SRPW, they aimed their efforts at the "sick and distressed"--whomever they might be. In fact, the Assistance Society complained that existing benevolent organizations had identified recipients for aid too narrowly and thus were

---

[5]Minute Book, Report for 1815, Association for the Relief of Respectable, Aged, Indigent Females in New York City Papers, New York Historical Society; *The Constitution and First and Second Annual Reports of the Proceedings of the Association for the Relief of Respectable, Aged, Indigent Females* (New York, 1815), 17. Each of this society's documents refers to its name in a slightly different way, but for simplicity's sake, I will refer to this organization as the Association for the Relief of Respectable, Aged, Indigent Females (ARAIF).

not reaching all who were in need. Pointing to the "pressures of the times" which disproportionately affected *all* categories of poor, its founders declared that they would work to "supply the deficiencies" of these other charities.[6]

The founders of benevolent organizations came from the middle and upper classes of the city. Merchants, physicians, politicians, ministers, as well as the women in their families, dominated their membership rolls and provided their leadership. For example, Elizabeth Hamilton—widow of Alexander—served as Second Directress of the SRPW and later as the First Directress of the OAS. Merchant Matthew Clarkson and politician Melancton Smith were founders of the Humane Society. New York City mayors Cadwallader Colden, DeWitt Clinton and James Duane were also members of the organization. In some cases, however, husbands and wives devoted themselves to different societies. For example, David Hosack, a prominent physician, was a member of the Humane Society while his wife, Mary, served as secretary for the SRPW.

Most often, membership in the societies was organized by gender. While all members of the Humane and Assistance societies were men, the membership of the SRPW, OAS and ARAIF was exclusively female. (In fact, the SRPW's constitution barred men from becoming members.)[7] Only the membership lists of the Christian Benevolent Society included both men and women, although women did not start becoming members in large numbers until 1814.[8] This segregation by gender mirrored contemporary views of the appropriate roles of men and women. All-male societies,

---

[6] Articles of the Constitution, Christian Benevolent Society Papers, New York Historical Society; *Assistance Society for Relieving and Advising Sick and Poor Persons in the City of New York, Constitution adopted December 10, 1808* (New York, 1809), 4-5.
[7] *Constitution of the Ladies' Society, Established in New York for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children* (New York, 1800), 9.
[8] A List of Members' Names, Christian Benevolent Society Papers, New York Historical Society.

such as the Humane Society, dealt with very public and political issues such as imprisonment for debt and legal reform. The women's societies, in contrast, dealt with more traditionally "female" responsibilities: aid to other women and to children.

While the charitable purposes of these societies should never be written off as a mere pretext for the social advancement of their leaders, it would be naive not to note that benevolent organizations thrived in part because they created a class of "administrators"—individuals who served as either board members or managers of the various societies, many of whom would have never otherwise achieved the degree of social distinction they enjoyed. Prominence in charitable causes was virtually the only way to distinguish oneself in contemporary New York society apart from office-holding or distinguished military service—both of which were activities closed to the clergy and to women. For these individuals participation in benevolence was an exercise in self-definition and self-promotion, in which issues of gender were often central. As leaders of charitable organizations, women could participate in the public sphere and, in particular, the world of municipal politics by petitioning politicians for financial aid, negotiating with city officials, and soliciting funds from the business community. The clergy were also attracted to organized benevolence because it offered them a means of professional mobility. Clergymen who did not serve large congregations or hold prominent positions within their denominations saw philanthropy as a way to enhance their professional standing.

Overall, the first wave of benevolence in New York was pragmatic and limited in its objectives. The main function of organizations such as the SRPW and the Assistance Society was to relieve the poor's physical suffering. By tracing the

evolution of each of these early societies, one can discover Early National New York's views of the poor, religion, gender and civic responsibility. More importantly, the societies reveal how each of these concerns merged with the others to create concepts of "poverty" and "relief" that would dominate the thinking of charitable undertakings for the rest of the nineteenth century.[9]

The Rationale of Benevolence

Reformed theology guided the first wave of benevolence and one of the largest Reformed dominations—the Presbyterians—dominated its leadership. Founders and supporters of benevolent societies often came from the ranks of the Presbyterian clergy, including John Rodgers, John B. Romeyn, Samuel Miller, Philip Melanchton Whelpley and Gardiner Spring. John M. Mason, who would provide support and spiritual guidance to the SRPW and the OAS, was a minister from the Associate Reformed Church, a dissenting sect of the Church of Scotland. The Presbyterians of the Early National Period enjoyed relative peace within the denomination. This was not always the case. A schism in 1741 had divided the denominations into separate and independently functioning parts but healed in 1758, making the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries a time of reorganization and increased discipline. The Presbyterians began to focus on creating institutions—such as voluntary organizations,

[9] Other private organizations that aided the poor at this time were the New York Hospital, the City Dispensary, the Manumission Society, St. Andrew's Society, St. George's Society, St. Stephen's Society, St. Patrick's Society, the Fire Department, the Tammany Society, the Marine Society, and the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen. I chose not to include these societies because they were either secular in nature or served as mutual aid societies for their members.

missionary societies and a theological seminary—to define and advance the denomination. New York's benevolent organizations were just one of these many institutions aimed at spreading Reformed ideas.[10]

In addition to the Presbyterians, the benevolent societies also recruited members of the Dutch Reformed Church, and in the case of the Christian Benevolent Society, Baptists. As fellow Calvinists, they all believed in the unqualified sovereignty of God, the total depravity of the human race and the predestination of the elect. In its most explicit formulation, the constitution of the Christian Benevolent Society required all members to hold Calvinist assumptions about predestination, human depravity and God's "efficacious grace."[11] Although most of the organizations were not as restrictive in their membership requirements as the Christian Benevolent Society, they still drew their members from a pool of individuals who shared their basic theological assumptions.

Calvinists accepted poverty as a natural element in society and stressed the Christian's *duty* to help the poor through almsgiving. In his 1816 charity sermon for the SRPW, Philip Melanchthon Whelpley of the First Presbyterian Church argued that God designated some people to be poor in order to demonstrate his goodness: "Yet God, who can bring good out of evil, often sends afflictions upon mankind, as a means of accomplishing the purposes of his mercy." In other words, God had placed the poor widows and children of the SRPW in their dire situation so that the wealthier members of the society could provide relief and in doing so honor by example his generosity to fallen mankind. Whelpley took this doctrine further by stating that the poor could even

[10] Hood, 5, 111-116; Balmer and Fitzmeir, 45-54.
[11] Articles of the Constitution, Christian Benevolent Society Papers.

find happiness in their poverty because they knew that God would provide for them: "There is a comfort in affliction—there is a joy in sorrow—there is something rich, even in the blankness of poverty, when we reflect that the existence of suffering proves the existence of the attribute of mercy." The poor could take comfort in the fact that they were the recipients of God's mercy and support. At the same time, the members of the SRPW and other societies could feel privileged to be participants in a divine plan.[12]

ARAIF's Annual Report for 1815 also affirmed these Calvinist attitudes toward poverty: "To relieve and comfort those aged females who once enjoyed a good degree of affluence, but now reduced to poverty *by the vicissitudes of Providence* must be deemed a very necessary, important *Christian obligation* [emphasis added]." Similarly, the members of the OAS claimed "to be the blessed instrument of Divine Providence in making good the promise of God, is a privilege equally desirable and honorable to the benevolent heart."[13] The ARAIF statement affirms the providential nature of poverty and emphasizes the duty of Christians to engage in charity; the OAS reiterates the notion that members of charitable organizations were "instruments" in God's plan to show mercy to the indigent.

Throughout the records of the SRPW, the members claimed that it was God, not they themselves, who truly supported the widows and orphans. Describing the aid that they provided to the pensioners in the winter of 1799-1800, the managers reported: "And though none could restore the *Father* and the *Husband*, the hearts of the mourners

---

[12] Philip Melanchthon Whelpley, *A Sermon Delivered on the 4th of February 1816 for the Benefit of a Society of Ladies Instituted for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children* (New York, 1816), 10,15.
[13] *The Constitution and First and Second Annual Reports of the Association for the Relief of Respectable, Aged, Indigent Females*, 15; *The Constitution, Laws and By-Laws of the Orphan Asylum of the City of New York with the Annual Reports and A List of Donations from its First Institution* (New York, 1815), 9.

were soothed by the Managers, while they dispensed the relief provided them, by their *Father* and their *Husband*, GOD."[14] In this case, it was God who replaced the patriarchal figure absent in these families and supplied the food, clothing and shelter that male heads of households traditionally provided.

A poem in an ARAIF publication conveys the same theme:

> Father of Lights, Almighty Cause
> O, wealth, and all that we call good!
> We act in concert with thy laws,
> In giving the needy food.
> To raise the poor by sorrow bow'd,
> To clothe the aged and infirm,
> Are actions which proclaim aloud
> The influence of the Saviour's name.[15]

Both the SRPW and ARAIF—two groups consisting entirely of women—used this conventional religious and patriarchal language to legitimize actions that often brought them into the public sphere. It was not they who provided relief but God Himself, in his role as "father." The women of ARAIF and the SRPW finessed the presumed disabilities of their gender by presenting themselves as *agents* for the ultimate patriarchal authority.

The notion that charity was also a patriotic and civic duty permeated the discourse on benevolence. Members believed that their efforts were improving the social health of their city. The Humane Society, for instance, wished to discourage

---

[14] *Constitution of the Ladies' Society Established in New York for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children*, 16.
[15] *The Constitution, First and Second Annual Reports of the Proceedings of the Association for the Relief of Respectable, Aged, Indigent Females*, 1.

street begging because it saw the practice as "disgraceful to a well-regulated city."[16] Similarly, the Assistance Society argued that its efforts to help the poor would "soon break up all street begging."[17] The SRPW was so determined to prevent begging that it threatened to remove any widow found begging from its books.[18] All of the societies claimed that they were providing an important service to the city by keeping the poor off the streets and out of the almshouse. This argument would prove to be particularly effective when the societies requested money from the city and state governments. The ARAIF, SRPW, and OAS all claimed that their services reduced the burden on public institutions—especially the almshouse—and improved the social environment of the streets.

The societies also maintained that a part of this civic duty was the transformation of the poor into "productive" members of society. Poverty might be part of a larger providential plan, but in the eyes of the members, it was unnecessarily exacerbated by what they saw as "idleness" and "vice." By teaching their pensioners how to become "hard-working," the members believed that they could help poor families support themselves and create a class of "industrious" laborers who would contribute to the city's economy. In an 1816 petition to the Common Council, the Society for the Promotion of Industry—an offshoot of the SRPW—stated that one of its main goals was to "encourage the idle beggar whom vice and wandering have covered with rags, to return to habits of Industry and to clothe herself with the garment of cleanliness—to instruct the children who are yet young in the [ways] of begging to seek

---

[16] *A Sketch of the Origin and Progress of the Humane Society*, 6.
[17] *Assistance Society...Constitution*, 7.
[18] *The By-Laws and Regulations of the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children* (New York, 1813), 6.

a more honorable living."[19] The Assistance Society, too, sought to encourage "industry, economy and uprightness of behavior."[20] The objective of each was to "reform" the allegedly destructive habits of the poor so that they could not only help themselves but also benefit the community as a whole. Once they learned proper "habits of industry" such as frugality, temperance, hard work, and even *cleanliness*, they could become useful laborers in the larger economy.

The OAS made use of this argument more than any other society. Its pensioners were small children, and the OAS was uniquely obliged to go beyond the issue of immediate relief to plan for the future of their charges. The members argued that their object was not merely to provide the orphans with shelter, clothing and food but to also "train up a number of virtuous citizens...who without this institution...might become vagrants and ultimate burdens on the [city] corporation." The members hoped that their moral and religious instruction would instill habits of hard work, morality and piety in the children, thus creating "virtuous citizens" who would, in turn, become responsible members of the community as adults. Moreover, the OAS promised that its schools would produce "a number of useful artisans and faithful servants" who would add to the economy's health. These children, if properly educated with vocational or domestic skills, would become part of the city's laboring class, productive and "useful" workers who were also responsible citizens.[21]

---

[19] Memorial of the Society for the Promotion of Industry in the City of New York, August 12, 1816, Common Council Papers, New York Municipal Archives.
[20] *Assistance Society...Constitution,* 14.
[21] *The Constitution, Laws and By-Laws of the Orphan Asylum*, 22. The OAS's methods for training children by gender will be discussed later in the chapter.

The societies often emphasized this notion of "civic duty" and republican patriotism when appealing to the community for money. In a charity sermon to benefit the SRPW, Philip Melanchthon Whelpley appealed to his listeners' sense of national responsibility: "Ye citizens! Who love your country—your state—your city, and would lay down your life for their defense, a milder—more benevolent—more heaven-pleasing sacrifice is now solicited. Some future patriot may be among the recipients of your bounty; and the tender plant, protected and nourished by your care, may, by and by, afford a grateful shelter for your offspring, or cast a fragrant branch upon your grave."[22] Charity was not just a religious or moral obligation. Rather, it was a mark of responsible citizenship analogous to the defense of the country.

Similarly, the OAS appealed to patriotism when it petitioned the state legislature in 1808: "The rational prospect of snatching from destruction thousands of wretched outcasts and rendering them, by virtuous education, respectable and useful members of the community, can never be considered by a patriotic legislature as an object of too small magnitude to claim their interest and their aid."[23] If the legislature wanted to ensure the future of the new nation, it needed to invest in the future of these young children, in this case by paying the debts the OAS still owed for the construction of the asylum. Unfortunately, the legislature did not grant the society's request.

In addition to the imperatives of religious and civic duty, empathy with the distressed played its role in the creation of the societies—particularly in the case of the SRPW. Many of the society's leaders were widows themselves. Directresses such as Isabella Graham, Sarah Hoffman and Elizabeth Hamilton were never as destitute as

---

[22] Whelpley, *A Sermon*, 29-30.
[23] *Constitution, Laws and By-Laws of the Orphan Asylum*, 6.

their pensioners, but they understood personally the peculiar troubles that came with widowhood in a patriarchal society. These women were obviously aware of the unique sufferings of a widow—especially one with children to support—and described her predicament candidly in the SRPW constitution: "Widow is a word of sorrow, in the best of circumstances: but a widow, left poor, destitute, friendless, surrounded by a number of small children shivering with cold, pale with want, looking in her face with eyes pleading for bread which she has not to give, nor any probable prospect of procuring—her situation is neither to be described or conceived!"[24] Without a husband's income widows were often forced to eke out a living at the bottom rung of society. The widows who founded and led the SRPW understood personally the precarious situation of these women and formed their organization in hopes of alleviating their suffering.

Elizabeth Hamilton, although not destitute, could relate to the fears and loneliness felt by the widows she aided. In a letter to her brother, Philip Schuyler, she expressed the anxieties shared by most widows. Overwhelmed by her concern for her financial situation and her children's future, she despaired that her troubles "bring demands of my attentions and exertions that my wounded heart is scarcely equal to, and brings my mind to that state that I could willingly say, into thy hands I commit my all powerful....Deity those children thou hast given me, to guard them through this world of disastrous events and permit me to fly to my Redeemer...and remain in his blest

[24] *Constitution of the Ladies' Society Established in New York for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children*, 16.

abode and there view my Hamilton."[25] This sense of despair pervaded many of her letters and undoubtedly influenced her decision to join the SRPW; her name first appeared on a list of SRPW managers in 1805, less than one year after the death of her husband.

Perhaps more than any other leader of the SRPW, Isabella Graham personally understood the dire predicament of a young widow with little children. In 1774 she had moved to Antigua to be with her husband, John, who was serving as a physician in the British Army. Shortly after her arrival, however, he died of a sudden illness, leaving her pregnant and stranded in a strange country with three daughters under the age of five. Graham's personal struggles taught her that widows, more than any other class of poor, depended on the generosity of their communities for survival. As a result she vowed never to remarry and to devote her life to helping other women.[26]

Throughout her life, Graham stressed the obligations that women had to one another. In an address at the opening of one of the SRPW's schools, she praised the "angelic band" of young women who had volunteered to teach: "But this labor of love! Who could have hoped for it? A society of *young ladies*, in rank, the first in the city, in the very bloom of life, and full of its prospects, engaged in those pleasures and amusements which generally engross the mind, and shut out every idea unconnected with self, coming forward and offering—what? Not their purses, that were *trash*: but their own personal services to instruct the ignorant and become the saviors of many of

---

[25] Elizabeth Hamilton to Philip Schuyler, February 9, 1805, Elizabeth Hamilton Papers, New York Historical Society.
[26] *The Power of Faith*, 17-18.

their sex."[27] Graham's speech suggested that philanthropic work provided an acceptable outlet for privileged young women who might otherwise succumb to vice if left idle. Membership in the SRPW allowed these women to use their talents performing "honorable" activities in a time when the professions were closed to them.

Empathy notwithstanding, the members of benevolent organizations did not consider the poor in any sense their equals. The class divisions that separated them were obvious. Physicians, ministers, merchants, politicians and their wives made up the bulk of the associations' membership rolls. Pensioners, in contrast, were either members of the laboring poor or part of the pauper class—destitute individuals who depended on either private charity or public assistance for survival. More often than not, the upper- and middle-class members believed themselves to be not only socially but also morally superior to those they aided.

The Practice of Benevolence: Material Relief

The central characteristic of the first wave of organized benevolence was the distribution of direct relief. Early charitable organizations provided a mixture of material and spiritual assistance, but most concentrated their efforts on meeting the immediate material needs of the poor. In attempts to help individuals survive during times of economic upheaval, illness, and war, societies supplied their pensioners with food, fuel, clothing, medical treatment and cash. Daily survival of the poor, rather than broad social or moral reform, was at the heart of early benevolence.

---

[27] Ibid., 406-407.

The SRPW and ARAIF, for instance, distributed such items as shoes, flannel, stockings, and groceries.[28] Both societies appointed "managers"—elected members who administered the relief—to distribute the goods to specific pensioners. In February 1814 alone, the ARAIF managers distributed commodities and cash valued at over $280 to more than 120 women. ARAIF managers typically worked in pairs, and each set was responsible for the relief of a dozen or more women. For example, Sarah Gunn and Gloriannah Cunningham, who kept meticulous notes of the provisions and amounts of cash they distributed to the fourteen women in their charge, distributed on February 25th cash in the amount of one dollar to Mrs. Hutchinson, a member of the "Dutch Church." On the same day, Mrs. Church provided Mrs. Coffin with calico, muslin and groceries valued at $3.97.[29] Each manager had the power to determine how much and what types of aid each pensioner would receive.

Similarly, the Humane Society made sure that the debtors in the city jail had enough food, clothing and fuel to keep them comfortable and healthy. From January 1799 to January 1800, the society relieved 139 persons and distributed large quantities of pork, beef, bread, potatoes, beans, wood and coal. After 1802, the Soup House allowed them to expand this direct relief to the poor in general. In addition to soup, the House provided potatoes, "Indian Meal," and eventually meat to the city's poor.

---

[28] Minutes of Meetings, October 31, 1809, Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children Papers, New York Historical Society.

[29] Expenditures of Money by the Managers, February 1814, Association for the Relief of Respectable, Aged, Indigent Females Papers, New York Historical Society.

Families who wished to eat at the Soup House could apply to the society's secretary for tickets.[30]

Members of the Christian Benevolent Society and Assistance Society also distributed provisions to what they called "pensioners," individuals dependent on charitable aid. In the case of the Christian Benevolent Society, a "visiting committee" met with relief recipients in their homes and distributed small cash payments. On April 4, 1805, the committee visited Mary Hollison, a poor woman whose husband—a man of "dissolute character"—had reduced her to poverty. The committee left her with a donation of 18 shillings. Uncomfortable with distributing cash directly to the poor, the Assistance Society instead chose to hand out tickets that could be exchanged for items from the "butcher, baker or other dealer."[31] This way, managers could maintain control over their pensioners' purchases and be certain that they were obtaining suitable provisions.

As the use of tickets indicates, most members of benevolent societies did not completely trust their pensioners, often suspecting them of poor judgment or outright deceit. Managers feared that if they distributed cash directly, pensioners might somehow waste the money on "spirituous liquors" or "superfluities" instead of paying their rent or buying food. As a result, a number of societies decided to keep close control over how recipients received their relief. The SRPW's constitution, for instance, insisted that relief would be provided only after members of the board visited

---

[30] *Longworth's American Almanac, New York Register and City Directory* (New York, 1801); Petition from the Humane Society, October 13, 1806, Common Council Papers, New York Municipal Archives; Smith & Carr's List for Meat Furnished the Humane Society, 1813, Common Council Papers, New York Municipal Archives; *Longworth's American Almanac, New York Register and City Directory* (New York, 1804).

[31] Minutes, April 4, 1805, Christian Benevolent Society Papers, New York Historical Society; *Assistance Society...Constitution*, 14.

an applicant to determine the nature of her character and that aid "shall be given in necessaries, and never in money, but by vote of the board."[32] The Assistance Society strictly prohibited the dispersal of cash and was adamant in its demand that every applicant be visited before receiving aid. In instructions to the visiting committee, the society urged visitors to "use their utmost endeavors to ascertain the real character and true situation of every person they visit."[33] The underlying argument in both cases was that even the "acceptable" poor always needed to be closely supervised when receiving aid.

The SRPW eventually changed its policy concerning cash payments once the managers discovered that providing pensioners with small sums of money was sometimes a more expedient and practical form of relief. Despite previous suspicions, managers eventually distributed money to help widows repay debts, purchase food at the market, and pay their rents. In 1804, the society even began providing widows with a monthly allowance ranging from a few shillings to four dollars, depending on the health of the treasury. On several occasions, the society gave widows money to defray the costs of leaving the city—either to return to their home country, if foreign-born, or to move to other parts of the United States to live with family or friends. In 1807, for example, the SRPW provided Widow Owens with fourteen dollars to help pay for her passage to Ireland. The managers reasoned that this lump sum, although admittedly

---

[32] *Constitution of the Ladies' Society Established in New York for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children*, 8-9.
[33] *Assistance Society...Constitution*, 13-14.

large, was actually smaller than the total amount the society would have spent had they kept her on the books for an extended period.[34]

Of all the necessities supplied by the early benevolent societies, fuel was perhaps the most crucial. The cold air and harsh winds of a port city made winter months in New York deadly for the elderly, the sick and the indigent. A sufficient supply of firewood could be a matter of life and death for many of the poor. The minutes of ARAIF reveal that the managers purchased wood and paid to have it carted to their pensioners' homes. Similarly, the SRPW made sure to provide its widows with firewood. In May of 1810, the treasurer, Catherine Few, purchased 400 loads of wood in anticipation of another harsh winter. She was able to convince the superintendent of the almshouse to allow the society to store the wood in its yard until winter. When the managers of ARAIF attempted to store their wood at the almshouse in June of 1815, however, they found that the superintendent was not as accommodating. This time the almshouse claimed it could not spare a room for the wood and refused ARAIF's request.[35] Despite these difficulties, both societies made the distribution of firewood their top priority each year and were successful in keeping their pensioners supplied with fuel.

In addition to material goods such as food, clothing and fuel, all of the societies used their funds to provide the poor with medical treatment. The Humane Society, for instance, often acted as a "watch dog" over municipal institutions and created a

---

[34]Minutes of Meetings, October 20, 1807, Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children Papers, New York Historical Society.

[35]Minutes of Meetings, May 1, 1810, Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children Papers, New York Historical Society; Minute Book Continued, July 27, 1815, Association for the Relief of Respectable, Aged, Indigent Females Papers, New York Historical Society.

committee to make sure that the city's jail facilities remained in a clean and healthy state. Since the health of prisoners often failed in the damp and dirty environment of the city jail, the society insisted that the city corporation provide "wholesome water and a physician" for the prisoners.[36] In 1804, the SRPW hired a Dr. Clarke to serve as the society's apothecary and to visit sick widows who could not leave their homes. The next year, the society resolved to become a member of the City Dispensary. In exchange for a thirty-five dollar per annum fee, managers were able to send their poor widows to the Dispensary's physicians for treatment. This timely decision saved many women that summer when a deadly yellow fever epidemic invaded the city. The society also provided for widows who were critically ill and in need of hospitalization. The board, for instance, paid for Widow Vesey's stay at the city hospital in the spring of 1805.[37]

Not surprisingly, the two societies that cared for children frequently required the services of a physician. Contagious diseases often proved deadly in the close quarters of nineteenth-century orphan asylums.[38] The annual reports of the OAS complained of bouts of illnesses—particularly whooping cough—sweeping the asylum. In August and September of 1800, the SRPW increased its efforts because of spreading illness among the widows' children. These children, "pent up in small, confined, hot rooms," had fallen victims to such diseases as the "summer complaint," whooping cough, scarlet fever and small pox. The society claimed that all of the children were treated and

---

[36] *A Sketch of the Origin and Progress of the Humane Society*, 4.
[37] Minutes of Meetings, July 30, 1804; July 3, 1805; November 25, 1805; and April 24, 1805, Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children Papers, New York Historical Society.
[38] Timothy A. Hacsi, *Second Home: Orphan Asylums and Poor Families in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 152-3.

"supplied with necessaries," but the society's expenses were greater than usual as a result.[39]

Each organization adopted different tactics because of the varying needs of their respective clients. The OAS was unique in that it built an asylum to house its pensioners rather than distribute outdoor relief. For obvious reasons, its founders' first priority when forming the society in 1806 was to provide shelter for their orphans, who would otherwise be sent to live in the almshouse or wander the streets. At first, the OAS rented a two-story house in Greenwich (outside of the city limits), but it quickly bought lots on Bank Street in the city with plans to build a house. In July of 1807, the builders laid the cornerstone for the new building that would accommodate up to two hundred orphans. Once completed, the asylum was three stories tall with a garden, woodhouse, washing shed and milk cows. A Mr. and Mrs. McFarlane supervised the home and were responsible for raising and educating the children. In the first six months the OAS received twelve orphans, but that number almost doubled by the end of the first year. The next year, the society added to those numbers when it decided to remove orphans under the age of seven from the almshouse and place them in the asylum. By 1809, the OAS could boast that it had provided a "refuge" for ninety-four orphans. The society's annual reports indicate that these numbers would continue to increase each year.[40]

---

[39] *Constitution of the Ladies' Society Established in New York for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children*, 21.

[40] Joanna Hooe Mathews, *A Short History of the Orphan Asylum Society in the City of New York, Founded 1806* (New York: Anson D.F. Randolph and Company, 1893), 11, 25-26; *The Constitution, Laws and By-Laws of the Orphan Asylum*, 57.

The Humane Society's efforts were similarly distinctive because its members provided legal aid to the debtors in addition to material provisions. The founders questioned the efficacy and fairness of imprisoning debtors—especially those who were in jail for owing small amounts of money and whose families had no means of repaying the debts while their principal breadwinners remained imprisoned. According to the founders of the society, placing debtors in jail not only exposed their health to "the sufferings of cold and hunger," but it also "infringes that fundamental axiom in legislation that the punishment of an offense should always be in proportion to the degree of it." In some cases, the society paid destitute prisoners' debts. In others, it provided a legal counselor for debtors who were either "ignorant of their rights" or unable to afford legal assistance. Early in its existence, the society took a bold step when it petitioned the New York legislature to consider legislation that would limit the duration of imprisonment for debtors who owed a sum less than twenty-five dollars. In its 1788-89 session, the state legislature indeed passed a law that released such prisoners after thirty days of incarceration. From this date on, the Humane Society concentrated on keeping the remaining prisoners well fed, healthy and cognizant of their legal rights.[41]

The SRPW and the OAS confronted a different situation because of the youth of their clients. Unlike ARAIF, which merely wanted to keep its elderly charges comfortable in their final years, the SRPW and OAS hoped to make their young clients self-sufficient adults. As a result, these two organizations stressed the importance of education and employment. First, the managers believed that an education would allow

[41] *A Sketch of the Origin and Progress of the Humane Society*, 1-4.

the children under their care to escape their poverty. To this end, the SRPW established a number of schools to teach reading, spelling, and religious catechisms. Young women and a number of the widows served as teachers. By 1805 the society had established sixteen schools with fifty-eight scholars. Once the children advanced in their studies to the satisfaction of the board, the society recommended them to one of the city's free schools. Similarly, the OAS instructed its children in reading, writing, arithmetic and "plain sewing." This basic education would prepare them for a "useful station in future life."[42]

The two societies assigned gender-specific trades to boys and girls. The boys would be apprenticed in traditionally male trades such as masonry or sail-making. Girls, in contrast, were expected to become domestic servants, an occupation that promised little independence or improvement when compared to the boys' apprenticeships. More promising, this training would prepare them to become future wives, which could, in turn, improve their status. The economic crisis during the War of 1812 made the placement of children particularly difficult. According to the OAS's 1813 annual report, fewer mechanics were willing to accept apprentices due to the "unsettled state of the times." As a result, the managers reluctantly began placing more boys with farmers in the hope that by "attaining a knowledge of agriculture" the orphans would learn the skills necessary to maintain an "honest and independent livelihood" in the country.[43]

---

[42] Minutes of Meetings, April 23, 1805, and January 14, 1806, Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children Papers, New York Historical Society; Mathews, 11.

[43] *The Constitution, Laws and By-Laws of the Orphan Asylum Society*, 13-18; Minutes of Meetings, March 21, 1803, Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children Papers, New York Historical Society.

Neither society had qualms over the use of coercion when binding out children. According to the SRPW's constitution, widows who refused to place their children into service would not receive relief. When the Widow Wright, for instance, refused to bind out her child, the secretary's report on her case stated that her child was "in danger of ruin from bad habits" and that Wright herself would be "put off the books" unless she complied with her manager's wishes. Similarly, the by-laws of the OAS stated that relatives and friends of the orphans surrendered all future claims on the children in the asylum. At the society's behest, the New York state legislature passed a law allowing members to bind out children without having to first appear before the police to meet any challenges from family members. The children themselves, however, were given a degree of choice as to where they would work. If after a month of service the child did not wish to remain with his or her assigned employer, they could ask to be placed in another household. Similarly, employers could terminate the indenture after a month if they were not satisfied with their servant or apprentice.[44]

The SRPW also stressed the importance of finding employment for its widows. The managers believed that if they instilled "habits of industry" in the women, they would find steady employment and be able to support themselves. As early as February 1803, the managers devised schemes to employ the widows with a variety of domestic tasks that would keep the costs of the Society down while preparing the women for economic independence. At first, a number of the women earned money by washing clothing and charging a fee. Others engaged in spinning flax. A committee consisting

---

[44] *A Constitution of the Ladies' Society Established in New York for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children*, 9; Minutes of Meetings, January 23, 1810, Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children Papers, New York Historical Society; *The Constitution, Laws and By-Laws of the Orphan Asylum Society,* 13, 17.

of three managers acquired a quantity of flax and several spinning wheels in order to set the widows to work. The following year the Society purchased a house on Partition Street where the women could spin their flax and sell various products to the city's inhabitants. The "Partition Street House" quickly became the focal point for the SRPW's employment program. The board divided the house into two apartments and appointed a widow to supervise each section. On the first floor of the house, Widow Butler oversaw those engaged in spinning and purchased small items such as tea and sugar for the widows' use. Upstairs, Widow Darby cut various kinds of cloth and distributed it to women who would in turn make clothing to sell. Darby also received applications from the community for washing and ironing orders.[45]

The SRPW expanded its employment program in 1814 when it established a "House of Industry" for "indigent and distressed women." In this instance, the members of the SRPW created a completely new society that would provide employment for not only its widows, but to *all* poor women in need of work. This was a far more ambitious plan because the SRPW was also now involved in creating new jobs. Calling itself the Society for the Promotion of Industry (SPI), this new group directed its efforts toward employing the elderly woman who, because of her age, "cannot hope to meet with an employer except for 'mercy's sake' but who still wish[ed] to earn the scanty pittance necessary to her subsistence." In an 1816 petition to the

[45] *A Constitution of the Ladies' Society Established in New York for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children*, 8; Minutes of Meetings, February 13, 1804, Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children Papers, New York Historical Society.

Common Council, the SPI claimed to have employed "upwards of 550 women" that year.[46]

Although leadership often requested public assistance, private donations and subscriptions formed the basis of most of the societies' funds. Societies charged their members annual subscription rates ranging from twenty-five cents to a few dollars. In the case of the Assistance Society, members who paid a three-dollar annual subscription could recommend one person to the society for relief. Those who paid six dollars could recommend two people.[47] Individuals who did not wish to become members of a particular society but who still wished to give their assistance, periodically donated money or items to the various societies. The minutes of ARAIF, for instance, reveal that benefactors donated cash, clothing, flannel, Bibles and other such items. Many organizations published a list of their subscribers and donators, revealing the names and amounts given by each benefactor. In February 1805, the SRPW placed an advertisement in the *Evening Post* and *Morning Chronicle* that listed the names of their supporters and the amounts each donated. The list contained the names of prominent merchants, politicians and businessmen--perhaps as a spur to others to follow their example.[48] The OAS also utilized the newspapers, but instead of publicizing previous donations, it appealed to readers for help in a time of financial crisis. In 1809, one such newspaper appeal brought the society much-needed cash, clothing and fuel.[49]

---

[46] Memorial of the Society for the Promotion of Industry, August 12, 1816, Common Council Papers, New York Municipal Archives.
[47] *Assistance Society...Constitution*, 10.
[48] Minutes of Meetings, February 2, 1805, Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children Papers, New York Historical Society.
[49] Mathews, 24.

Given the cost of their respective agendas, members of the charitable societies were obliged to search for creative ways of raising additional funds. A number of societies, such as the Humane Society, ARAIF, SRPW and OAS, enlisted ministers to preach charity sermons for them. For example, Presbyterian, Episcopalian and Dutch Reformed ministers preached sermons in their churches in support of the SRPW and took up collections for the society. The Rev. Abeel of the "Dutch" Church raised $744 for the SRPW after delivering a charity sermon in March 1807. Other organizations, such as the Musical Society, performed concerts to raise money for the charities as well. Still other donations came from legacies left by wealthy patrons, as in 1804, when the SRPW inherited £100 from the late Mrs. Depeyster.[50]

Although the societies relied primarily on private donations, the city and state governments did provide some public funding. This money became particularly useful during hard times, when individual donations to charities fell off. Members appealed to both the city government and the state legislature for aid, often claiming that such assistance would in the long run save both bodies a great deal of money in poor relief. In 1815, the members of ARAIF wrote a letter to the mayor and Common Council reminding them that its efforts helped the city by lightening the burden on the almshouse and other forms of public aid. The Common Council responded by sending $300 dollars to the treasurer.[51] Similarly, the SPI's 1817 petition to the city argued that the House of Industry had employed approximately 2,000 women, many of whom

[50] Minutes of Meetings, March 10, 1807, Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children Papers, New York Historical Society.
[51] Minute Book Continued, October 26, 1815; December 5, 1815, Association for the Relief of Respectable, Aged, Indigent Females Papers, New York Historical Society.

would have otherwise "appeared in the list of importunate paupers at your almshouse door."[52]

At various times the SPI, ARAIF, SRPW and the Humane Society all reported having received money from the city. One group, the OAS, however, received $500 annually from the state legislature but had difficulty obtaining money from the city. In December 1809, Mary Stansbury, the society's secretary, sent a petition to the city corporation describing the orphan asylum's important work in the city and asking: "how could this cause be a misapplication of public money?" Calling upon the corporation's traditional role as protector of the poor, Stansbury claimed that the OAS and the city government were the only parents these poor orphans had: "This institution is a consolation to dying parents—to whom nothing earthly could afford a sweeter consolation than to know that a refuge was provided for the helpless child under the fostering care of those who can feel as mothers, and patronized by enlightened magistrates, the public guardians of the poor and desolate." Closing the letter with a reminder that "this society consists of the wives and mothers of your fellow citizens," Stansbury reiterated the society's maternal function. The city, however, rejected the petition.[53]

The annual operating expenses of any of the organizations never exceeded several thousand dollars according to the accounts their respective treasurers published for the benefit of the public. Both ARAIF and the SRPW reported annual budgets of less than two thousand dollars. A number of societies struggled under perpetual

---

[52] Memorial of the Society for the Promotion of Industry, 1817, Common Council Papers, New York Municipal Archives.
[53] Mathews, 25-28.

indebtedness. The OAS, for instance, revealed in 1809 that it still owed close to six thousand dollars to various artisans and laborers who worked on the construction of the new asylum. This amount slowly decreased each year, but it was not until 1819 that the society was able to reduce the outstanding amount to $200.

The effectiveness of each society was limited by such financial constraints. In times of thin resources, the SRPW was forced to reduce the number of widows on its rolls. In December 1803, the managers removed Mrs. Hunt from their books because she only had one child and was therefore "not considered as needy" as widows with more children. The following summer, however, a healthier treasury allowed the society to expand its aid. At this time the managers agreed to amend a former rule that prevented widows from receiving aid in the summer—a season that they perceived as less arduous for the poor. Now, the extra funds allowed them to provide assistance during these warmer months—but only to sick widows who had at least four children under the age of ten.[54] Other organizations followed a similar pattern of expanding and restricting relief in proportion to their resources. Often, this type of sporadic relief served as more of a "stop-gap" measure for individuals than a solution for the unemployment, illness, widowhood or the kind of injury that caused their poverty.

Although many members frequently expressed frustration about the financial limitations of their organizations, no one argued for a radical change in their methods. No organization in the first wave of benevolence claimed that poverty could be eliminated from society altogether. Instead, their goal was to make earthly life for the poor as comfortable as possible and to prepare pensioners for the rewards of the

[54] Minutes of Meetings, December 1803, July 6, 1804, Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children Papers, New York Historical Society.

afterlife. To meet this latter objective, each organization incorporated elements of religious instruction—usually in the form of moderate Calvinist Protestantism—into their relief programs.

Religious Instruction

Although the aims and methods of the Christian Benevolent Society, the SRPW, the OAS, ARAIF and the Assistance Society were very different from the proselytization campaigns of later societies in the second wave of benevolence, religious instruction was still an integral part of their program. Food, clothing and medicine might preserve the physical bodies of the poor, but what would happen to their souls? With this concern in mind, the members assumed responsibility for their pensioners' salvation and worked to provide them with spiritual guidance. True happiness for the poor would not come from food, shelter, good health or possessions, but rather from a sense that a better world awaited them in an afterlife. The visiting committee of the Assistance Society, for instance, was responsible for praying with the poor in their homes, encouraging them to attend worship, and instructing them "in the essential principles of the Christian religion." In fact, the members argued that the sufferings and privations of the poor prepared them to receive religious guidance: "When the mind is softened by calamity and the heart is awake to the sentiments of gratitude, what a suitable time to bestow on the sons and daughters of affliction counsels of prudence and religion, which, if followed, under the influences of grace,

would not fail to produce their welfare in future life and their eternal and immeasurable felicity."[55]

The Christian Benevolent Society, a Baptist organization, similarly instructed its visiting committee to pray with recipients and provide religious instruction. According to its constitution, the purpose of the society was to "not only hand out that pecuniary relief which their situation requires, but also to direct their minds to a consideration of those important things which regard their present and future felicity." The society's minutes reveal that the visitors were often shocked by the religious "ignorance" of their pensioners and attributed their despair over their situation to this unfortunate circumstance. The visiting committee noted the situation of Peggy Gordon, a woman in "the greatest distress imaginable" who had fallen into a "state of insanity" after her husband abandoned her. The night before the committee arrived, her nine-year-old son had died and was now laid out in the home. To make matters worse, Gordon was pregnant and "expecting to be confined every hour." The committee lamented the fact that the woman had little acquaintance with religion and believed that her lack of faith prevented her from "receiving much comfort in her complicated distresses." The committee prayed with her and left her with 16 shillings, perhaps allowing her to purchase some much-needed firewood.[56]

Religious instruction was also a key element of relief for the women's benevolent organizations. During their visitations, Sarah Hoffman and Isabella Graham of the SRPW prayed with the widows and offered spiritual comfort. One contemporary

---

[55] *Assistance Society...Constitution*, 4.
[56] Articles of the Constitution; Minutes, February 4, 1804, Christian Benevolent Society Papers, New York Historical Society.

noted that "it must not be forgotten that these visitors, into whatsoever house they entered, failed not to instruct the ignorant, frequently leaving a religious tract behind them, and thus convince the objects of their bounty, that they were the servants of a compassionate savior."[57] Similarly, the managers of ARAIF monitored the spiritual state of the women on their books. The constitution stated that it was the duty of the managers to "endeavor to impress upon the subjects of their benefactions the necessity and importance of religion." To this end, each manager kept detailed records of her pensioners' personal information including age, address and religious denomination. Since most of the women were confined to their homes, the managers distributed Bibles, tracts and pamphlets (in large print and in a variety of languages) to take the place of communal worship and instruction.[58]

In the hopes of shaping the minds of their younger pensioners, the schools of the SRPW and the OAS stressed religious education. The General Report published by the OAS in 1815 claimed that although the society provided the children with shelter and a practical education, a "far more important object" was their religious and moral education. By "training up in the paths of virtue" this "most destitute class of human beings," the managers hoped to transform their orphans into "useful" citizens. Both the SRPW and the OAS introduced Biblical lessons into their curriculum and required that each student "commit to memory" catechisms and hymns. In 1805, the SRPW

---

[57] Stanford, *Composure in Death*, 30.
[58] *The Constitution and First and Second Annual Reports of the Proceedings of the Association for the Relief of Respectable, Aged, Indigent Females*, 4.

distributed books printed at the society's expense entitled "Sermons for Children" to use in the schools.[59]

In conjunction with local ministers, the managers oversaw and evaluated this instruction. The Rev. John Stanford regularly visited the schools of the OAS to deliver sermons and examine the children in their catechisms. On May 22, 1816, he recorded in his diary "a solemnly delightful" occurrence when twenty-two of the children recited their lessons with "great promptness." Stanford, an ardent advocate of religious education for the city's youth, made it a point to visit the asylum's schools frequently in order to lend support to what he considered a worthy cause. He argued that of all categories of children, orphans were in the greatest need of proper instruction. Lacking parents "to foster their tender years," these children were prone to "committing depredations on the public." Without proper guidance, he argued, they would continue in their depraved ways until they succeeded in "viciously destroying themselves."[60]

Although widespread proselytization was not an objective of the relief-based charities, members still stressed the importance of individual religious instruction. After all, most members participated in charitable activities out of a sense of their own religious responsibility. Scripture verses such as "The poor ye have always with you; and whensoever ye will, ye may do them good" (Mark 14:7) and "Blessed is he who considereth the poor" (Psalm 41) showed up routinely in the records of early benevolent

---

[59] *The Constitution, Laws and By-Laws of the Orphan Asylum*, 4; Minutes of Meetings, April 23, 1805, December 29, 1805, Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children Papers, New York Historical Society.

[60] Stanford Diary, May 22, 1816, John Stanford Papers, New York Historical Society; John Stanford, "Divine Benevolence to the Poor," John Stanford Miscellaneous Papers, New York Historical Society.

organizations.[61] In the minds of the members, charity was by no means simply a product of some "natural" generosity or sympathy. Rather, it was motivated by the Christian belief that God required his followers to help those who were less fortunate than themselves. The members of benevolent organizations considered their efforts to be the fulfillment of this command and an expression of their piety.

The Recipients of Relief

Some pensioners, such as the orphans of the OAS, had been born into poverty. Others fell into the situation through unfortunate circumstances or old age. Many of the Humane Society's pensioners, for instance, found themselves in debt following economic depressions or business failures. Similarly, most of the women aided by ARAIF had enjoyed some degree of financial security in their youth but were now no longer able to support themselves in their old age. Either their husbands had died or they did not have families nearby to take them in. According to its minutes and annual reports, the ARAIF managers focused their energies on keeping women "who once lived respectably" out of the almshouse—a place that no "respectable" woman would like to find herself.[62] The women who applied for aid from the SRPW came from a greater variety of backgrounds. A number were immigrants. Others had been born in America—either in New York or elsewhere. A few had previously enjoyed wealth and comfort. Others had known poverty all their lives.

---

[61] *The Constitution, First and Second Annual Reports of the Proceedings of the Association for the Relief of Respectable, Aged, Indigent Females*, 3; *Assistance Society...Constitution*, 6.

[62] Minute Book Continued, Third Report, 1816, Association for the Relief of Respectable, Aged, Indigent Females Papers, New York Historical Society.

Widows, orphans, the elderly, sick and disabled fell into the traditional categories of "worthy" or "deserving" poor. These individuals were not held to be responsible for their situation and therefore were "worthy" of aid from charitable institutions. Relief societies even vied with one another in claiming that their particular set of clients was the single most deserving of the deserving poor. The Humane Society declared that "there is, perhaps, no class of objects more deserving of the exercise of beneficence than that of destitute debtors in prison."[63] Orphans, according to the OAS, were the most pitiful group of paupers: "Amongst the afflicted of our suffering race, none makes a stronger or more impressive appeal to humanity, than the destitute orphan," declared the preface of the 1808 Constitution. "Crime has not been the cause of its misery, and future usefulness may yet be the result of its protection. The reverse is often the case of more aged objects."[64] ARAIF, too, argued that its pensioners were uniquely worthy of relief. In a letter to the Rev. John Mason, the managers noted, "Charitable associations are becoming more numerous, and frequent are the calls on Public bounty, but not any of them can have a greater claim than the elderly."[65] All of these indigent groups *deserved* relief in the eyes of the members because external forces—such as imprisonment for debt, infirmity, age or some other perceived weakness—and not their own character failings prevented them from supporting themselves.

Ministers found many ways to support their rival claims of "worthiness." Whelpley argued that all civilizations deemed widows and orphans worthy of charity

---

[63] *A Sketch of the Origins and Progress of the Humane Society*, 1.
[64] *The Constitution, Laws and By-Laws of the Orphan Asylum*, 9.
[65] Minute Book Continued, September 23, 1815, Association for the Relief of Respectable, Aged, Indigent Females Papers, New York Historical Society.

but pointed out that no where had this been more evident than in the communities described in the Old and New Testaments. Even in these very early civilizations, God designated widows and orphans as a special category: "All creatures are the constant recipients of his [God's] diffusive beneficence. But in a particular sense, God has required himself to be recognized as the benefactor of this destitute portion of his universal family." Similarly, the Rev. John Stanford argued that orphans were a distinct category of poor and "worthy" of assistance. In his sermon "Divine Benevolence to the Poor," Stanford praised the work of the OAS, which he referred to as "one of the brightest ornaments of our City." According to Stanford, the society aided the "helpless orphan" with shelter, education and religious instruction. He predicted that all of these actions "promise the greatest advantages to the infant and the general community."[66]

Because the societies were exclusively concerned about relieving only those poor who were "worthy" of assistance, the members placed a great deal of emphasis on the "character" of individual pensioners. Only applicants who possessed a "good character"—that is, they were hard working, disciplined and followed a specific code of moral behavior—received relief. The societies established one or another form of screening processes to weed out applicants found to be "unworthy." The Assistance Society's Constitution instructed the visiting committee to interview applicants' neighbors in order to "ascertain the real character and true situation" of those requesting aid.[67] ARAIF's records indicate that the members preferred to accept applicants who came with recommendations—preferably from members of the city's upper or middle

---

[66] Stanford, "Divine Benevolence to the Poor," John Stanford Miscellaneous Papers, New York Historical Society.
[67] *Assistance Society...Constitution*, 13.

class. In the case of Widow Amy Davis, for example, the society accepted her in January 1815 after a Dr. Ball and a Mr. Young recommended her to the leadership.[68]

Pensioners who passed this initial screening process could still later be found "unworthy" and removed from the books if they violated the rules or ignored the moral code of their society. In 1805, the SRPW removed Mrs. Ogden, "a woman of ill fame," and in 1806 denied aid to Elizabeth Green for her "disorderly conduct."[69] The Assistance Society stopped providing relief to individuals who did not keep their apartments clean, continued to beg, demonstrated signs of laziness, neglected worship or engaged in "vice."[70] Similarly, in 1814, ARAIF declared that "intemperance and dishonesty excludes all persons from the relief of the society."[71] The SRPW ceased aid to any widow caught selling liquor.[72] Managers kept careful watch over their pensioners to make sure that they were abiding by these standards.

In many cases, these inspections evolved into a form of moral surveillance. The Society's minutes provide the most detail about Widow Beaty, who in 1813 was apparently denied aid because of her penchant for dancing. In March the Society suspended her relief for a month when her manager found she had been "dressing and going to dances after having been advised to the contrary." Evidently, this reprimand

---

[68] Minute Book Continued, January 13, 1815, Association for the Relief of Respectable, Aged, Indigent Females Papers, New York Historical Society.
[69] Minutes of Meetings, December 2, 1805, October 27, 1806, Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children Papers, New York Historical Society.
[70] *Assistance Society...Constitution*, 16.
[71] Minute Book Continued, May 28, 1814, Association for the Relief of Respectable, Aged, Indigent Females Papers, New York Historical Society.
[72] Minutes of Meetings, October 1804, Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children Papers, New York Historical Society.

did not dissuade her from attending subsequent dances, because the following month the managers deemed her "unworthy of any future assistance."[73]

The SRPW's injunction against the selling of liquor was particularly difficult for many widows to follow. Operating a tavern or selling liquor was one way that poor widows supported themselves, and few were willing to give up the income that this business provided. Nonetheless, the managers of the SRPW removed Rose Campbell from their books for selling "spirituous liquors contrary to a bye-law of this Society."[74]

For all of their insistence on the deserving character of the people they chose to aid, society members displayed ambivalent attitudes toward their pensioners. Some of the societies' policies reveal an assumption that the poor could not be trusted because they were prone to deceit or immorality; often members blamed such "character flaws" for their pensioners' poverty. In an April 1800 report, for instance, the SRPW criticized the mechanic class for its love of "luxury," declaring it "an evil too general to be cured." In the eyes of the managers, the artisan class as a whole lived beyond its means—spending its money on goods and luxuries instead of saving for the future. The widows on the society's pensioner rolls had been "partners in this evil" and were now "suffering the punishment." It was now up to the Society to encourage them to give up these old habits and "learn economy from adversity."[75] For all its professions to the contrary, the SRPW searched for deficiencies or flaws within their widows to explain their dire situation and God's purposes in reducing them to poverty.

---

[73] Minutes of Meetings, March 27, April 12, 1813, Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children Papers, New York Historical Society.
[74] Minutes of Meetings, February 1812, Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children Papers, New York Historical Society.
[75] Minutes of Meetings, Report of the Board of Direction, April 1800, Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children Papers, New York Historical Society.

At the same time, however, societies continued to portray their pensioners as "helpless" or "vulnerable" victims of misfortune who deserved pity and merited aid. In his 1816 charity sermon, Whelpley claimed that although all of the poor deserve benevolence, "the fatherless and the widow are distinguished above all classes by their innocence—their helplessness—their interesting character."[76] In his view, the pensioners' helplessness to improve their situation entitled them to more attention than other groups of poor. ARAIF labeled its pensioners equally helpless. According to its 1814 annual report, the women on its books had reached a "second infancy" in their old age and now relied on others for their survival—just as they had done when they were children. In these instances, the members did not blame their pensioners for their poverty, but instead argued that the poor were innocent, weak and even child-like.

A number of organizations even began to move away from providential explanations for poverty and instead routinely blamed social and economic circumstances for the plight of their pensioners. Mangers realized that epidemics, war, periodic unemployment, and a turbulent economy were the source of widespread suffering. Their pensioners were at the mercy of these forces and no amount of moral reform or hard work could change this situation. In an 1809 petition to the Common Council, the OAS lamented the problems associated with the city's commercial economy: "The subjects of misfortune and misery multiply in large commercial towns, many of whose citizens engaged in maritime pursuits, either perish at sea or die in distant countries, leaving their children orphans or dependent on the precarious life of a languishing mother." During the War of 1812, the managers of the SRPW complained

---

[76] Whelpley, *A Sermon*, 20.

that shortages resulting from the war were driving up prices, making it difficult for the young widows to obtain food, clothing and fuel. The Society announced in 1813 that "an attentive observation has thoroughly convinced us that it is an impossibility for a widow, with the labour of her own hands, to support her infant family."[77] The managers recognized that no matter how hard these women worked, there was no way for them to afford the food and items necessary to support themselves or their children, but their critique of society stopped at this point. It would be left to some of the leading figures of the second wave of benevolence to move beyond these obvious strictures and engage in sustained social criticism of an economy that paid too little for hard work and charged too much for basic necessities.

Trans-Atlantic Connections

European benevolent societies often served as models for their American counterparts. Britain's Society for the Discharge and Relief of Persons Imprisoned for Small Debts and the Female Orphan Society inspired the founders of New York City's Humane Society and Orphan Asylum Society, respectively. The Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor and the Lying-in Society, both located in London, also predated the American societies and spread their influence across the Atlantic. French philanthropists had also created charitable institutions in the eighteenth century, namely the Philanthropic Society of Paris and the Societe de Charite Maternelle (Society for

[77] *The By-Laws and Regulations of the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children*, 21.

Maternal Charity).[78] All of these organizations would either directly or indirectly prompt American philanthropists to establish their own counterparts. In the case of the SRPW, however, such influence traveled in the reverse direction. The founders of that society were pleased to find that their organization "inspired other women across the seas." On a trip to London one of the managers described the SRPW's efforts to "several ladies" who had heard of the New York society and were eager to imitate it. The Duchess of York offered to serve as a sponsor and the London society dispensed charity to the widows and orphans in its midst. The SRPW could now boast that theirs was the "first organization of its kind in America [and] probably the first in the world."[79]

The leaders of the New York societies often corresponded with European philanthropists. Isabella Graham, founder of the SRPW, the OAS, and the SPI, utilized connections in her native Scotland as she established her own charities. As a young widow with several children, she had relied on the help of friends and family in Scotland for survival. One such friend was Lady Glenorchy, an aristocrat who was very active in charitable work, focusing her efforts on poor widows and orphans. Graham had often distributed alms to the poor for Glenorchy and supported herself by teaching in one of her patron's schools for young girls. It was in this capacity that Graham first discovered the benefit of combining charitable relief with religious instruction. She also learned of the idea to establish workshops to employ the poor and schools to

---

[78] *A Sketch of the Origin and Progress of the Humane Society,* 4; *An Account of the Rise, Progress and Present State of the Society for the Discharge and Relief of Persons Imprisoned for Small Debts* (London: 1784); Williams, 89-90; Stuart Wolf, "The Societe de Charite Maternelle, 1788-1815," in *Medicine and Charity Before the Welfare State,* ed. Jonathan Barry and Colin Jones (New York: Routledge, 1991), 100.
[79] Mathews, 9; Stanford, *Composure in Death,* 27-28.

educate their children.[80] She immigrated to New York after her patron's death but remained in contact with other women philanthropists of Scotland. In her correspondence with Margaret Walker, the wife of an Edinburgh merchant, she shared news in 1789 about the newly created SRPW and its immediate successes. She noted that the work was a little overwhelming, however, for "the poor increase fast: emigrants from all quarters flock to us, and when they come they must not be allowed to die for want."[81]

Britain was not the only source of influence for the New York societies. The Orphan Asylum Society, for instance, proudly traced its lineage to August Hermann Francke's famous orphanage in Halle, Saxony.[82] Francke, a German scholar, minister, and philanthropist, established the orphanage in 1696 to shelter and educate poor children. The orphanage eventually evolved into a large complex, consisting of a hospital, pharmacy, and a series of schools that educated children of all classes—including the poor. The orphanage was an outgrowth of Francke's devotion to Pietism, an evangelical movement within Lutheranism which emphasized both the active propagation of Reformed Christianity and the necessity of social reform. Pietistic sentiments, particularly an emphasis on charity, had spread throughout Europe and eventually found their way to North America. A Pietistic network of information and influence had connected Halle, London, and the British Colonies in North America ever since the 1740s. This influence would continue well into the nineteenth century,

---

[80] *The Power of Faith*, 30-37; Rev. Samuel Burder, ed., *Memoirs of Eminently Pious Women of the British Empire*, vol. 2 (London: 1815), 256-257.
[81] *The Unpublished Letters and Correspondence of Mrs. Isabella Graham, From the Year 1767 to 1814; Exhibiting Her Religious Character in the Different Relations of Life, Selected and Arranged by Her Daughter* (New York, 1838), 223-4; Burder, 351.
[82] *The Constitution, Laws and By-Laws of the Orphan Asylum*, 55; Mathews, 114; Stanford, *Composure in Death*, 35.

spurring revivals and charitable ventures in the United States.[83] The OAS would become one of the most important examples of this influence in the Early National Period.

Conclusion

The societies of the first phase of benevolence in Early National New York City focused their efforts on providing direct relief to the poor. Their form of relief was generally pragmatic in approach, low budget, limited in its aims, and carefully targeted to its potential clients. The ascetic Protestant Christianity prevalent among New York's upper and middle classes played a large role in defining this type of benevolence, but proselytization efforts were secondary to supplying material aid. The members of early benevolent societies considered poverty to be a natural element in society, mandated by providence, and accepted as their religious and national duty the obligation to help the poor. Thus, a combination of religious and nationalist sentiment underscored this first wave.

Societies formed after 1812, however, would adopt a different approach to benevolence. These groups, which will be discussed in the next chapter, placed proselytization and moral reform at the center of their programs. This second wave of benevolence, the "City Mission Movement," viewed the poor as a vast "missionary field" and adopted policies similar to the missionary organizations that sent ministers overseas and to the American frontier. The City Mission Movement expanded the

[83] Renate Wilson, *Pious Traders in Medicine: A German Pharmaceutical Network in Eighteenth-Century North America* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 23-28.

definition of the "worthy poor" to include groups traditionally considered to be beyond help: sailors, "vagrant youth," criminals and prostitutes. In order to convert or reform such individuals, city missions sent ministers to the outer wards of the city, built churches along the waterfront, established an asylum for "repentant" prostitutes, and pushed for reform in the New York State Prison. The objectives of the city mission movement were much more ambitious than those of the charitable organizations of the first wave of benevolence, but the newer societies were often far less practical in attempting to achieve them.

CHAPTER III

"BRETHEREN, DO YOU NEED THE CONSOLATIONS OF A REGULARLY PREACHED GOSPEL? SO DO THE PAUPERS!": THE ORIGINS OF THE CITY MISSION MOVEMENT AND THE SECOND WAVE OF BENEVOLENCE

In March 1817, the Rev. Ward Stafford delivered a report to the Female Missionary Society for the Poor of the City of New York and Its Vicinity at its quarterly prayer meeting. For the previous nine months, Stafford had been serving as the society's missionary to New York's poorer inhabitants, distributing Bibles and offering spiritual guidance in many parts of the city. At this particular meeting, he reviewed his responsibilities and then offered his observations on the religious state of the people whom he encountered. He noted that as he traveled through the "destitute sections of the city" he found that hundreds of families lacked proper "religious instruction." Few households possessed Bibles and only a handful of churches served these populous neighborhoods. Announcing that "a new missionary field has opened to my view," he called on the residents of the city to expand their missionary efforts to include the urban domestic poor: "When we consider that our large cities constitute the center of exertions for salvation for the Heathen, that in them are thousands of Christians, by whose means Bibles and Missionaries are conveyed to every part of the world, it will be thought almost incredible, that in the midst of them there should be immense multitudes who are entirely destitute of religious instruction and of all the ordinary means of

grace."[1] New York City's poor population was now a target of missionary efforts, and the organizations that took up this cause gave rise to New York's first city mission movement. These missions would become the focal point of the second wave of benevolence, which emphasized proselytization and the moral reform of the poor rather than the distribution of direct relief. The cultivation of individual piety combined with improved behavior would, the missionaries claimed, raise the poor out of their impoverished state.

Stafford assigned responsibility for spiritual aid to the poor to the city's elite. These individuals would be in the best position to provide financial backing for the creation of religious institutions and the publication of spiritual literature. He suggested that the religious community distribute tracts and Bibles to poor families, many of whom did not belong to a local church. He also urged his listeners to establish additional houses of worship and send ministers to the outer wards—northern and waterfront districts populated by laborers and poor families. In addition to promoting "religion" (i.e., evangelical Protestant Christianity), these campaigns would also solve what he considered to be permanent problems in these areas: crime, prostitution, intemperance, and idleness. In Stafford's mind, all the inhabitants of the city were required to live piously in the "interests of civil society," but the poor, in particular, were in desperate need of the "transforming effects of the gospel."[2] A large number of New York's middle- and upper-class residents agreed with Stafford. Philanthropists

---

[1] Ward Stafford, *New Missionary Field, A Report to the Female Missionary Society for the Poor of the City of New York and its Vicinity at its Quarterly Prayer Meeting* (New York, 1817), 6.
[2] Ibid., 4.

and reformers had already been organizing societies for these very purposes since 1812, and Stafford's vibrant message simply reinforced their sentiments.

The benevolent movement bifurcated after 1812, forming two distinct campaigns that operated concurrently but pursued different agendas. In some ways, the second wave of benevolence resembled the first. The combination of nationalism and Calvinist doctrine influenced the development of each, convincing reformers that they could create an improved society. One of the main ideas behind the creation of domestic missions was to protect the Republic from what was perceived as threats of irreligion and immorality. New York's city mission movement's focus was local, proselytizing to its own urban poor and promoting reform throughout the city, but it also hoped that, through the power of its example, its efforts could be extended to the nation as a whole. Calvinism through its emphasis on the reciprocal relationship between the poor and wealthy also continued to shape reform policies, as the city missions' leadership remained predominantly Reformed.

At the same time, however, the city missions' new approach demonstrated that a large segment of New York's Protestant community had begun to revise its attitude toward poverty and poor relief. First, the leaders of the city mission movement adopted a revised form of Calvinism that abandoned the long-established belief that poverty was a permanent phenomenon. Although they continued to hold that poverty was a product of Adam's Fall, they no longer believed that it could only be relieved and never eradicated. Second, the city missions were unique in that their founders redefined the category of "worthy poor." Now prisoners, sailors, vagrant youth, and prostitutes were added to the missions' rolls in addition to more traditional objects of charity such as

widows and orphans. Previous poor relief efforts had never deemed such individuals deserving of aid because they could not be held "blameless" for their condition. While the founders of the city missions never argued that sailors and prostitutes were somehow now innocent, they considered them *redeemable* and therefore "worthy" of their institutions' attention nonetheless. Third, and most importantly, close interaction between the missionaries and the poor eventually convinced a few of the movement's leaders that social and economic circumstances—rather than individual sin—were the cause of men's and women's poverty. As a result, a number of missionaries became vocal social critics and added institutional and economic reform to their evangelical agendas.

The Origins of the City Mission Movement

As in the first wave of benevolence, British organizations—including Bible, missionary and tract societies—served as models for the American missionary movement, both foreign and domestic. The efforts of the British and Foreign Bible Society and the London Religious Tract Society (which distributed religious materials to the poor of England) encouraged Americans to do the same in their own country. The London Missionary Society, which dispatched missionaries to such places as the South Sea Islands, inspired the creation of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in 1810 and a host of domestic missionary organizations. The most significant of these was the New York Missionary Society, established in 1786, which sent missionaries to northeastern frontier settlements and to Native American tribes

such as the Shinnecocks and Montauks of Long Island. The British societies corresponded frequently with their American counterparts, often sharing their annual reports and other important information. In some cases, the British societies even helped to finance budding American organizations. These trans-Atlantic efforts formed what historian Charles Foster calls the "United Evangelical Front," an extensive Anglo-American movement to promote Protestant Christianity throughout the world in the nineteenth century.[3]

The city missions of New York City were domestic missions, but their work differed from organizations such as the New York Missionary Society in that they focused on proselytizing the urban poor. The objects of their efforts were not distant farmers on the frontier or anonymous inhabitants in far-off lands. Rather, the urban poor worked, lived, and raised families in the same city—and sometimes even the same neighborhoods—as their would-be benefactors. They were New Yorkers whose lives were a visible contradiction of the ideals of the new Republic: order, stability, prosperity, and in the eyes of evangelical reformers, piety.

The earliest appeals for a city mission in New York simply sought to augment existing municipal institutions. In 1810, Ezra Stiles Ely, a Presbyterian minister, called upon the inhabitants of the city to support a permanent minister at the almshouse, city hospital, and state prison. In *A Sermon for the Rich to Buy, That They May Benefit Themselves and the Poor*, Ely asked: "Brethren! Do you need the consolations of a regularly preached Gospel? So do the paupers."[4] A number of ministers, including Ely,

---

[3] Foster, 65-73; Rosenberg, 49-50.
[4] Ezra Stiles Ely, *A Sermon for the Rich to Buy, That They May Benefit Themselves and the Poor* (New York, 1810), 22.

had been visiting these institutions on a regular basis, but despite their best efforts, they were unable to meet the needs of the inmates through a part-time, voluntary ministry. The ministers had good reason to feel overwhelmed. According to its superintendent's report in 1809, the almshouse supported 764 paupers.[5] That number would reach 2,930 just five years later in 1814.[6] Similarly, the hospital reported in 1811 that it had been assisting over 1,000 individuals a year.[7] The handful of ministers who volunteered their time could not keep up with the growing numbers of poor in these institutions. Ely's sermon stressed the importance of ministering to the poor and suggested that either the municipal government or private individuals sponsor official chaplains. Salaried ministers, unlike volunteers, would be able to devote all of their time to visiting the sick, delivering weekly sermons, and offering spiritual guidance. He urged his readers to "tax your luxuries," "forsake theatre," and "abstain from a fourth glass of wine" in order to save money for this important expense. By sacrificing these trifling indulgences, the city's elite could amply provide for a permanent chaplain to serve the poor.[8]

Other New Yorkers echoed Ely's demands. A letter from "A Christian" addressed to "The Inhabitants of the City of New York" appeared in the *New York Evening Post* shortly after the publication of Ely's sermon. The author urged the public to heed Ely's call on behalf of the poor in their community. Appealing to the missionary spirit of his readers, "A Christian" reiterated what was rapidly becoming a

---

[5] Census of the New York Almshouse, August 14, 1809, Common Council Papers, New York Municipal Archives.
[6] Annual Report of the Superintendent of the Almshouse and Bridewell of the City of New York, April 1, 1814, Common Council Papers, New York Municipal Archives.
[7] Ezra Stiles Ely, *Journal of the Stated Preacher to the Hospital and Almshouse in the City of New York, for the Year of Our Lord, 1811* (New York, 1812), 7.
[8] Ely, *A Sermon for the Rich to Buy*, 23-24.

commonplace: "While we are trying to spread the gospel to the Heathen, we are actually suffering our own poor to suffer under our own eye."[9] Two years later in 1812, the Rev. Philip Milledoler asked the city if it was willing to ignore the "missionary ground" in its own community. The poor in the almshouse and hospital were in desperate need of ministers, but so far the city had been unable to provide adequate support for resident clergy. Insisting that financial support of domestic missionary work was just as critical as foreign missions, he declared that the "soul of a pauper in the Almshouse is as valuable as the soul of an Indian on the banks of the Ganges." He doubted that the municipal government would be willing or even able to offer any financial assistance to this pursuit. The city was suffering from its own financial problems, and public officials would hesitate to offer assistance to any given religious group for fear of being accused of favoring one denomination over another. As a result, he argued, private individuals would have to assume the burden of supporting a chaplain if the city was to have permanent clergy serving its public institutions.[10]

From 1810 to 1812 Ely continued to visit the almshouse and city hospital on a voluntary basis, relying on small donations from members of the community. Other clergy from Protestant congregations also volunteered their services, but the need for a permanent chaplain continued.[11] In an attempt to generate support for his cause, Ely published the first volume of a journal that described his tasks in both institutions and offered his observations on the religious state of the poor. In this 1812 publication, he told of his visits with prisoners, orphans, widows and prostitutes, often stressing the

---

[9] *New York Evening Post*, November 12, 1810.
[10] Ely, *Journal of the Stated Preacher*, 8-9.
[11] *Commercial Advertiser*, December 14, 1813.

willingness of these individuals to accept spiritual guidance. Ely's strategy was to include as many accounts of individual conversions as possible in order to overwhelm his readers with proof of the value of providing a chaplain. This journal contained entry after entry recounting stories of death-bed conversions and of more fortunate individuals whose lives had been transformed by contact with the Gospel.[12]

Ely's efforts eventually attracted the notice of the city. By the end of 1812, he realized his goal of establishing an official organization that would support a permanent minister in the almshouse and hospital, freeing himself and his successors from dependence on uncertain private donations. On December 23, 1812, a group of New York City merchants, ministers, and lawyers formed the Society for the Support of the Gospel Among the Poor in the City of New York (SSGP). Ely served as the society's preacher until June 1813. In July, the SSGP replaced the Presbyterian Ely with a Baptist minister, John Stanford, who expanded the post's duties to include the debtors and state prisons, the bridewell, orphan asylum and the Magdalen House.[13] In return for his services, he received an annual salary of eight hundred dollars. For the next thirteen years, Stanford would serve as the city's permanent missionary to the poor.[14]

The SSGP's efforts would inspire the growth of other city missions in New York. The founders of these subsequent missions were not the same as those of the SSGP, but they, too, considered the urban poor to be a virgin field for proselytization. These later organizations, however, focused on a new approach—the creation of *independent* missions for the poor that were not associated with municipal institutions.

---

[12] Ely, *Journal of the Stated Preacher*, 6.
[13] In 1812, the Magdalen Society established the Magdalen House to serve as an asylum for reformed prostitutes. Chapter Four is devoted entirely to the creation of this organization and its efforts.
[14] *Commercial Advertiser*, December 14, 1813, December 13, 1820.

In 1816, a group of upper- and middle-class women organized the Female Missionary Society for the Poor in the City of New York and Its Vicinity. According to the society's constitution, the purpose of the organization was to promote Protestant Christianity among the "hundreds, probably thousands, of the poor in this city, who, either on account of their poverty, their wickedness, or their ignorance, are destitute of the common ordinances of the Gospel." Like the SSGP, the Female Missionary Society recognized the need to reach out to the "unchurched" poor: "Are there not some among the destitute of our own city for whom Christ died? Some Elect who must be gathered in?"[15] To this end, the members hired the Rev. Ward Stafford as its missionary and commenced the construction of a house of worship on Bancker Street, located in a predominantly laboring-class ward. The society provided church services for the neighborhood, sent ministers to visit families, and established schools for the children.[16]

Just two years later, in 1818, another group of New York merchants and professionals established a mission for the city's sailors. The members who formed the New York Marine Missionary Society lamented what they saw as the "wretched moral condition of sailors."[17] Pointing to the shortage of chapels on the waterfront combined with the "temptations on shore"—taverns and brothels—the Marine Missionary Society decided to establish a mission that met the unique needs of these men and their families. In the fall of 1818, the society opened a temporary chapel on Cherry Street along the waterfront. If sailors had access to a house of worship at their home port, it was argued, then they would be more apt to maintain their faith when away on a voyage. Ward

---

[15] *Second Anniversary Report of the Female Missionary Society for the Poor of the City of New York and its Vicinity* (New York, 1818), 5,7.
[16] Ibid., 3-4.
[17] *The Constitution of the New York Marine Missionary Society* (New York, 1818), 5.

Stafford worked as the society's missionary, delivering sermons and conducting prayer meetings throughout the week. The society hoped that these efforts would transform the lives of the sailors, regenerate the waterfront, and eventually bring about a "revolution in the seaports."[18]

The Marine Missionary Society received its inspiration from London's Marine Society. A group of British aristocrats and merchants had founded the organization in 1756 during the Seven Years War as means to train poor young boys and vagrants to become sailors in the British navy. The founders attributed the "disorder" found in the ranks of the Royal Navy's ordinary seamen to their presumptively unfortunate and immoral youth. As a result, the society provided the boys with clothing, food, medicine and religious instruction in the hopes of "breeding up a race of seamen" who were healthy, obedient and moral. It also provided aid to adult seamen who were in need of clothing and religious guidance. Like the American benevolent societies that were fashioned after its model, Britain's Marine Society fused Christian and patriotic duties. Not only did the founders believe that they were fulfilling a Christian responsibility to help the poor, but they also held that their efforts would enhance Britain's naval and economic power—both of which were crucial in a time of war.[19] American city missions would adopt a similar ideology combining Christian charity and patriotism during their own war with Britain in 1812.

---

[18] Edward D. Griffin, *The Claims of Seamen, A Sermon Preached November 1, 1819 in the Brick Church, New York, for the Benefit of the Marine Missionary Society of that City* (New York, 1819), 19; John B. Romeyn, *A Sermon, Delivered in the Middle Dutch Church, March 21, 1819, for the Benefit of the Marine Missionary Society* (New York, 1819), 19.

[19] *An Account of the Marine Society, Recommending the Piety and Policy of the Institution, and Pointing out the Advantages Accruing to the Nation* (London, 1759); *Instructions, Religious and Prudential to Apprentices and Servants in General, Placed Out by the Marine Society* (London, 1763). For more information on the London Marine Society, see James Stephen Taylor, *Jonas Hanway Founder of the Marine Society: Charity and Policy in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London: Scolar Press, 1985).

The leaders of the city mission movement came from New York City's middle and upper classes, just as the founders of the traditional charities in the first wave of benevolence did. In some cases, the same individuals served on the boards of both types of benevolent organizations. Two prominent merchants, Divie Bethune and Leonard Bleecker, belonged to the Humane Society (an organization discussed in the previous chapter) and the SSGP. Other prominent New York personalities such as Revolutionary war veteran and local politician Henry Rutgers helped organized the SSGP. The women who headed the Female Missionary Society were often the relatives of merchants and politicians. Two in particular, Susan Spring and Mrs. Matthew Perrine, were married to highly visible ministers who often preached charity sermons for benevolent organizations.

The missionaries tended to be individuals who for one reason or another were not attached to a permanent position at a church. In some cases, these men hoped that a post with the SSGP or some similar society might lead to a position at a settled congregation. Ezra Stiles Ely fit into this category. Before moving to New York, he had been the pastor of a Congregational church in Connecticut. When he began his ministry in New York City's almshouse in 1810, now as a Presbyterian, he was only twenty-six years old and still young enough to find a permanent pastorate. In 1813, he left New York for Philadelphia, where he served as pastor at the Pine Street Church until 1844.[20] His replacement, John Stanford, had been without a permanent church since 1801. He had originally been pastor of a Baptist church on Fair Street in New York, but the yellow fever epidemic of 1798 killed many in his congregation, and then a

[20] James Grant Wilson and John Fiske, eds., *Appletons' Cyclopædia of American Biography*, vol. 2 (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1896), 339-340.

fire in 1801 destroyed his church.[21] As minister of the SSGP, however, Stanford found stable employment and a variety of venues in which he could preach: the bridewell, almshouse, state prison, city hospital and a number churches including the Fayette Street Baptist Church. The city missions offered ministers such as Ely and Stanford a chance to achieve a position of significance in their professions and their community despite the fact that they lacked permanent congregations. Stanford's replacement of Ely as the SSGP's preacher resulted in a stronger evangelical emphasis to the society, but his professional position was very similar to that of Ely.

Redefining "the Poor"

One of the most distinctive aspects of the city mission movement was its enlargement of the notion of the "worthy poor." Unlike charities in the first wave of benevolence, which relieved traditionally acceptable groups of poor such as widows, orphans and the elderly, the city missions broadened their efforts to include the "able-bodied" poor: unemployed men, sailors, prisoners and vagrant youth. Stanford called such individuals the "necessitous" poor. The necessitous poor may not have been as destitute as poor widows or orphans, but their marginal existences and allegedly immoral lifestyles meant that they were likely to fall into poverty at some point in their lives. An able-bodied worker, for instance, could easily become a pauper if he or she wasted money on frivolities such as alcohol and gambling or became too ill to work from such dangerous pastimes. Worse yet, the working class's supposed unwillingness

[21] Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone, eds., *Dictionary of American Biography*, vol. 9 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), 500-501.

to save money left it vulnerable to the vagaries of the economy. Prisoners were an unusual group to include in the "necessitous poor," but the reformers recognized that many inmates in the city jail and state prison had already been living on the margins of society before their incarceration. Moreover, if they had families, wives and children in all likelihood suffered economically as their fathers, husbands, and sometimes even their mothers sat idly in jail.

The reformers argued that all of the individuals in this new category of "worthy" poor suffered because of their individual sins—or more specifically, *vices*. All people were sinners, of course, but the offenses that led to poverty were very specific. In the minds of middle-class reformers, the poor drank too much alcohol, gambled, brawled, and engaged in a variety of other impulsive activities that depleted their small wages and endangered their ability to go on working. Ward Stafford provided a unique analysis of this relationship between sin and poverty. In his report to the Female Missionary Society he declared that "almost all of the suffering of the poor in this and other cities are the immediate effect of ignorance or vice." The poor, he argued, displayed a wide variety of immoral behaviors: irreverence on the Sabbath, profanity, lying, gambling and prostitution. One of the most alarming aspects of this pervasive immorality, however, was the living arrangements of poor families. During his travels throughout the city Stafford witnessed families living in close quarters, often with "four to twelve" families in each house. In some cases two or three families lived in one room and people of all "colours" lived together indiscriminately. These arrangements, in his opinion, were the result of the "natural corruption of the human heart" and evidence of the poor's predisposition to immorality. "The simple fact," he argued, "that

people live together in the manner described and without the restraints of religion, is strong evidence that they are immoral."[22] Here Stafford implied that the poor were caught up in a vicious cycle of poverty and sin. Sin led to poverty, which, in turn, encouraged self-indulgence and ignorance in a self-perpetuating cycle. In his opinion, an inherent amorality and a lack of religious guidance among the poor—rather than economic necessity—caused such individuals to live in these circumstances where the crowded arrangements led to "promiscuous" behavior. Stafford assumed that a desire to fornicate or engage in other illicit acts was what led to crowded apartment life, not high rents or economic hardships. The only solution to this problem, in his mind, was proper religious instruction.

In his reports to the City Hospital, John Stanford often linked immoral behavior to both poverty and illness. In a sermon to the "lunatic department" he noted that "human nature in its fallen state exhibits little else than one vast hospital. Sin has produced a variety of diseases, both in the body and mind, which none but the God of mercy and compassion can possibly cure." In another sermon at the hospital he encouraged his listeners to consider the sources of their illnesses. Acting as a spiritual physician, he provided his own diagnosis: "Although it is peculiarly the province of those who fill the medical department to designate the causes, variety and progress of bodily diseases, it is by no means foreign to my duty to say that some of them are constitutional, others accidental, and not unfrequently, there are diseases which are the fruit and just consequence of our own follies and disobedience."[23] Such follies, in his mind, included indifference to religion, the use of profane language, and intemperance.

---

[22] Stafford, *New Missionary Field*, 12.
[23] Report on the City Hospital, 1813, John Stanford Papers, New York Historical Society.

These behaviors, in addition to other immoral actions, were the cause of much of the illness, suffering, and poverty that existed in this world.

Perhaps the most damaging vice in the eyes of city missionaries was intemperance. Stafford claimed that men who frequented the various tippling houses and grocers (shopkeepers who sold a variety of goods, including alcohol) often reduced their families to "beggary and wretchedness."[24] The Female Missionary Society agreed. One of the main problems the city faced, its members argued, was that of over-indulgence of alcohol. The poor, in particular, abused "ardent spirits" and had turned the city into a "wilderness of sin." In this way, New York City was no better than "heathen" lands. The Second Annual Report suggested that although "no children here are made to pass through the fire unto Moloch, that no widow shrieks on the funeral pile[,] multitudes are reeling to and fro in consequence of the intoxicating draught. Multitudes are dancing to the sound of the viol unconscious of the awful destruction that awaits them."[25] Drinking and dancing among New York's poor, that is, were held to be just as destructive as the sacrifice of children and widows among, respectively, the kings of ancient Judea and the followers of Hinduism. The leaders of the missions regarded the behavior of the poor as "uncivilized" and "barbaric," reflecting the cultural barrier New York's elites had attempted to erect between themselves and the ordinary men and women of the city.

Nevertheless, the missions did not dismiss the unchurched poor as irredeemable. "Shall we be discouraged because of their depravity?" the Second Anniversary Report of the Female Missionary Society asked as it looked to its overwhelming task of

[24] Stafford, *New Missionary Field*, 13.
[25] *Second Anniversary Report of the Female Missionary Society*, 4.

reforming the poor.[26] The unspoken answer was *no*, and the society—as well as the other mission groups—strove to reform the character of its pensioners. Even individuals who seemed farthest from reform could be saved by the transforming effects of the Gospel. The Rev. Edward Griffin, in a charity sermon for the Marine Missionary Society, argued that although sailors were "ruined and immoral" beings, nothing inherent in their nature or character prevented them from being reformed. The Rev. John Romeyn agreed and claimed that sailors' supposed immoral behavior was not a result of their occupation, but from "the negligence of the church" in not properly ministering to them.[27] No individual, no matter how "corrupt" or "vicious" in the eyes of the reformers, was taken to be beyond the reach of God's power.

Because the city missions enlarged the category of worthy poor to include able-bodied men and women, their members adopted different attitudes toward their pensioners than the members of traditional charities. In contrast to the founders of the SRPW and the Assistance Society, the members of the missions did not consider the unchurched poor to be innocent victims of providence or unfavorable economic circumstances. The Female Missionary Society revealed its opinion of the outer wards and their inhabitants when it described its chapel for the poor as located in a "vicious part of the city."[28] Similarly, Stafford commented on the unsavory character of poor neighborhoods and their residents. Noting that several streets in laboring neighborhoods were unsafe for women to visit, he insisted "no person of decent

---

[26] *Second Anniversary Report of the Female Missionary Society*, 5.
[27] Griffin, *The Claims of Seamen*, 7; Romeyn, *A Sermon*, 20.
[28] *Second Anniversary Report of the Female Missionary Society*, 5.

character would live in such places."[29] Viewing the poor through middle- and upper-class lenses, the members of the missions placed them collectively in one large category, the vicious and the immoral. Their poverty set them apart from the city's wealthier residents, who might never meet the individuals they assisted with their donations. By 1812, the population of New York City was large enough to create a degree of distance between the poor and wealthier neighborhoods, making it easier for the city's elites to formulate broad and inaccurate generalizations about the poor community. This preconceived and hostile view of the poor contrasted sharply with attitudes held by the members of the older, more traditional charitable societies who had more direct interaction with their pensioners.

Even the existing institutions of poor relief were found to be tainted by the "viciousness" of poverty. In its appeal for a permanent city chaplain, the *New York Evening Post* described the almshouse, state prison and city hospital as places of "wretchedness and guilt."[30] The SSGP labeled each of these institutions respectively as an "asylum for the poor," a "receptacle for the criminal," and a "refuge for the diseased."[31] These places were not merely damp, crowded places of misery in a literal sense. They were also the abodes of the sin and immorality that brought about poverty and disease. In a sense, these institutions became the symbols of what was plaguing the city morally, socially, and economically.

It is important to note that the city missions did not neglect traditional objects of charity such as widows and orphans in their efforts. They did, however, approach their

---

[29] Stafford, *New Missionary Field*, 15.
[30] *New York Evening Post*, November 12, 1810.
[31] *Fourth Report of the Board of Trustees of the Society for the Support of the Gospel Among the Poor in the City of New York* (New York, 1817), 3.

needs in a different way. Rather than supplying this needy group with money, food and clothing—as did the SRPW—the missions focused on supplying spiritual guidance. In the case of N__cy W__n, a Welsh widow with three young children who for an undisclosed reason was in prison, John Stanford offered spiritual comfort by praying with her and reading from the Bible. In his report to the SSGP, he expressed hope that her contrition and newfound faith were evidence of her salvation.[32] N__cy may have previously received material relief from the SRPW, but now that she lay dying in prison, she received a new kind of assistance from the city's missionary. This widow was experiencing the efforts of the second wave of benevolence in the form of spiritual instruction.

Proselytization and Church Construction

The various organizations that made up the city mission movement maintained that the city's established churches had neglected the poor of their community and that it was now their responsibility to remedy the problem. Both Ely and Stafford noted the paucity of churches in the outer wards of the city. According to Stafford's rough calculations, nearly one-half of the city's inhabitants in 1817 were "destitute of the ministry." Because most churches were located in the wealthier but less densely populated parts of town—the first and second wards in the lower portion of Manhattan island—the majority of inhabitants of New York did not have access to a congregation near their homes and had to either walk long distances to attend services or forgo

[32] *Fourth Report of the Board of Trustees of the Society for the Support of the Gospel among the Poor*, 9-10; State Prison Report, January 1, 1825, John Stanford Papers, New York Historical Society.

worship altogether.[33] New Yorkers who were either too sick or feeble to attend services, as Ely pointed out, faced an even more difficult time when trying to observe the Sabbath.[34]

Social distinctions compounded poor men's and women's difficulties. Even if the poor could find a way to attend a church, Ely and Stafford added, they often felt unwelcome in many congregations. A problem as simple as the lack of decent clothing prevented many from joining a church. The custom of pew rentals also discouraged the poor from attending church—or at least from sitting close enough to the preacher to hear his message. At best, the few who had means could only afford a pew at the back of the sanctuary. Others simply did not attend church because they could not pay for seating at all.[35]

In Stafford's opinion, sailors in particular felt even less comfortable in many of the city's churches. He argued that their transient lifestyle made it difficult for them to become a permanent member of a congregation and their peculiar dress drew unfavorable attention from the other congregants.[36] Simon Newman's work on poverty in Philadelphia suggests that sailors' clothing, body markings, and mannerisms were indeed quite distinct, setting them apart from other members of their community. The short stature, "rolling gait," scars and tattoos of mariners signaled to the rest of the world that they were men who had experienced the grueling labors of sea life. Moreover, their short jackets and pants covered in waterproofing oil and tar set them apart. Although sailors took great pride in their appearance, it did cause them to stand

---

[33] Stafford, *New Missionary Field*, 6-7.
[34] Ely, *A Sermon for the Rich to Buy*, 21.
[35] Ely, *A Sermon for the Rich to Buy*, 21; Stafford, *New Missionary Field*, 7.
[36] Stafford, *New Missionary Field*, 34-35.

out when they mingled with others on shore.[37] According to Paul Gilje's study of mariners, the stereotype of "Jack Tar"—whether warranted or not—often colored the perceptions held by middle-class residents living on shore. The image of the drunken and violent sailor dominated the minds of many of the city's residents who associated waterfront life with prostitution, gambling and tippling houses. Interestingly, the middle-class reformers concluded that these traits made sailors perfect candidates for reform and were attracted to the challenge of purging this particular group of their immoral behavior.[38]

Whether or not sailors felt shunned by the community is not clear. What is apparent in Stafford's sermon is that he believed this to be the case. In his opinion, the distinct appearance and culture of sailors drew contempt from the rest of the city and often caused some churches to refuse sailors admittance into their congregations. Not only were middle- and upper-class residents shocked by mariners' peculiar appearance, but they were also repelled by what they assumed to be the immoral behavior associated with it. In an attempt to keep such individuals out of their neighborhoods, a number of the city's congregations either banned sailors outright or made services very uncomfortable for them.[39]

The city mission movement's strategy for bringing religion to the all-but-heathen poor was two-fold. First, the missions hired ministers to preach throughout the

---

[37] Newman, 104-106.
[38] Paul Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 202-203, and "On the Waterfront: Maritime Workers in New York City in the Early Republic, 1800-1850," *New York History* (October 1996): 396-398.
[39] Griffin, *The Claims of Seamen*, 10; Stafford, *New Missionary Field*, 34-35.

city. In the case of the SSGP, John Stanford visited the poor in various city institutions including the almshouse, bridewell, city hospital, and state prison. At times, he would even call on the sick at their residences. On a typical day he would visit a number of places, preaching to and praying with those he met. A diary entry for January 22, 1816, for instance, records his grueling routine: "Visited the City Hospital, Bridewell and Almshouse where many are sick and dying. Myself very unwell by extreme fatigue."[40] He filled his days with such visits, walking from institution to institution until his poor health forced him to take a carriage. According to his diary, he preached an average of twenty-nine sermons a month in 1816 and an annual total of 439 in 1817.

In addition to preaching at the various city institutions, Stanford provided other services for the poor. He listened to the children of the Orphan Asylum recite their catechisms, organized schools for the youth in the state prison and almshouse, and intervened on behalf of prisoners. In the case of George Vanderpool, a man sentenced to death for arson, Stanford pleaded with the governor to commute his sentence. Apparently his arguments were persuasive, for the governor reduced his sentence to life in prison. When he attempted to do the same for Diana, a "condemned woman" in the Bridewell, however, he was unsuccessful. Despite his frequent complaints of depression and fatigue, he maintained this demanding schedule until 1825.[41]

Stanford's efforts as missionary may have been helpful to those living in municipal institutions, but it did not address the religious needs of the rest of the urban poor. The city missions' second tactic, the construction of churches in poor

---

[40] Diary, January 22, 1816, John Stanford Papers, New York Historical Society.
[41] State Prison Report, January 1, 1825, John Stanford Papers, New York Historical Society; Stanford Diary, January, March, and April 1817, John Stanford Papers, New York Historical Society.

neighborhoods, was directed to this population. The Female Missionary Society and the Marine Missionary Society were the first to erect permanent structures to serve as churches in the outer wards. Ward Stafford, the minister serving both of these organizations, argued that the construction of separate churches for working-class or poor residents would be the most beneficial solution for all. Not only would these churches be located in neighborhoods that were accessible to the poor, but they would also be free from the class tension that existed in other churches where laboring and upper-class congregants mixed. Moreover, he argued, these churches could offer less expensive pews—or even free seating—to members.[42]

The Female Missionary Society opened its chapel in the fall of 1817. Located on Bancker Street in the fourth ward, it was accessible to the laborers and poor who lived in this area. The ministers held services on Sundays and provided lectures on Thursday evenings. In December 1818, the Marine Missionary Society established a temporary house of worship on Cherry Street, near the wharves on the East River. Sailors were encouraged to bring their families to its services and attend the weekly prayer meetings. According to one minister's estimates, the services were well-attended, often attracting four to five hundred congregants on Sunday evenings.[43] Both organizations employed Ward Stafford and one or two other missionaries to perform services and minister to the neighborhoods.

The cost of employing missionaries and of construction of chapels required substantial sums of money. The missions may have addressed poverty in a different way than traditional charities, but its members found that established methods of fund

---

[42] Stafford, *New Missionary Field*, 25-26, 33-34.
[43] Romeyn, *A Sermon*, 19.

raising remained the most effective. The majority of the societies' incomes came from subscriptions and donations. Like the SRPW and the Orphan Asylum Society, the city missions offered yearly subscriptions to patrons for a few dollars. In the case of the Female Missionary Society, only women could hold subscriptions. The SSGP and the Marine Missionary Society, however, opened membership to both men and women. In fact, the Marine Society even allowed children to hold subscriptions for a reduced fee of fifty cents.[44] In addition, ministers from various denominations gave sermons in their churches on behalf of one of the societies in the hopes of generating money through a collection at the end of the service. These sermons were also printed and sold as a means of raising more funds.

These fund-raising tactics were identical to those of established charities, and, like those bodies, the city missions often struggled to make ends meet. At most, the missions enjoyed only a slight cushion in their treasuries for operating costs. In 1816, the treasurer of the SSGP reported that it had functioned on little over nine hundred dollars over the previous year. The finances of the Female Missionary Society were even more precarious. In 1818 the society raised $743 to cover its expenditures of $713, leaving a mere $30 in the treasury at the end of the year.[45]

---

[44] *The Constitution of the New York Marine Missionary Society*, 4.
[45] *Fourth Report of the Board of Trustees of the Society for the Support of the Gospel Among the Poor*, 6; *Second Anniversary Report of the Female Missionary Society*, 4.

Revivalism, Millennial Expectation and the City Mission Movement

New York's city mission movement was part of a much larger wave of domestic missionary efforts throughout the United States inspired by a series of religious revivals. Known collectively as the Second Great Awakening, the revivals began at the end of the eighteenth century and reoccurred periodically through the antebellum era. Like the revivals of the First Great Awakening of the 1740s, these revivals led to mass conversions and the spread of evangelical Christianity to many parts of the country. From Maine to Kentucky, new congregations appeared and existing church rosters expanded as preachers convinced audiences to turn from their sinful ways and accept God's redeeming grace. The successes of this revivalism in rural areas convinced many church leaders that they could extend evangelical religion in urban areas—especially among the poor.

Part of the city mission movement's sense of urgency stemmed from the belief that the Millennium—Christ's thousand-year reign on earth as described in Revelations—would occur sometime in the foreseeable future and that they were living in an extraordinary period of preparation for the event. This belief created an environment of optimism among reformers who argued that it was their duty to prepare for Christ's return by promoting morality and curing social ills such as poverty and crime.

A number of historians have examined the nature of Millennial thought in North America and found that it was quite prominent in the discourse of the Revolutionary and Early National Periods. They note that the political, social and economic crises of

this era combined with the belief that God had predetermined the course of human history convinced many Americans that Christ's return was imminent. This anticipation was certainly not a new phenomenon and could trace its origins as far back as the Reformation, but during the War of 1812 such expectations were especially high in many parts of the United States, precisely at the time that the first city missions emerged. Fires, earthquakes, comets and other natural phenomena that occurred in 1811 and 1812 created a great deal of anxiety in the United States, causing some to interpret these events as signs of the last days. The war with Britain only heightened such anxieties.[46]

Sermons published between 1812 and 1815 in New York City reveal the sense that the Millennium was imminent and the concern that the United States was not yet prepared for Christ's return. In his 1812 jeremiad, the Rev. Stephen Rowan of the Dutch Church in Greenwich exclaimed that he had never seen a period as tumultuous as the present: "The universe is in commotion. Almost all of the nations of the earth are in arms." Two main "tyrants" of the world—France and England—were wreaking havoc both on land and at sea. This turmoil, he argued, was due in part to God's anger with the United States for its sins, including the election of leaders "who have not the fear of God before their eyes" and "the alarming prevalence of irreligion and profaness." [47]

Similarly, the Rev. Alexander McLeod published a series of sermons in 1815 that warned of the nefarious influences of the Antichrist. Although the Napoleonic

---

[46] Susan Juster, *Doomsayers: Anglo-American Prophecy in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 200-202. See also Nathan Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), and Ruth H. Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[47] Steven Rowan, *The Sin and Danger of Insensibility Under the Calls of God to Repentance* (New York, 1812), 10-18.

Wars had ended and a settlement was in place, he was sure the world would not experience peace for long. Not only had the Bourbons been returned to the French throne and the "Germanic Empire" restored, but the Pope had "resumed his mitre." Obviously, McLeod did not place much faith in a postwar settlement which recognized the Catholic Louis XVIII as the legitimate ruler of France—an action that was considered to be reactionary among republican and Protestant circles in the United States. Exhibiting a sense of apocalyptic urgency, he concluded that "the last head of the beast is more conspicuously revealed to view; and in the adjustment of the balance of power among antichristian nations, the ten horns may be more distinctly displayed before the last vial is poured out by the angel of destruction."[48] In both examples, the ministers warned that Christ's return was at hand and that it was time for the nation to turn to repentance and reformation.

The leaders of the city mission movement subscribed to Millennial thought in an extremely nationalistic form. As members of a new nation, these leaders believed that they—and all Americans—had a special role to play in bringing out these events. The United States, they argued, with its superior form of government and moral character would lead the way in welcoming Christ back to earth. As a result, it was imperative for Americans to be diligent in their faith as they waited for Christ to return. One of the missions' many responsibilities was to convert as many sinners as possible—at home and abroad—before it was too late for them to change. In a sense the city mission movement was just one of the various attempts to accomplish just this.

---

[48] Alexander McLeod, *A Scriptural View of the Character, Causes and Ends of the Present War* (New York, 1815), 229-230.

This sense of apocalyptic expectation permeates the records of the societies. Stafford's report to the Female Missionary Society told of the coming Millennium and hoped that the establishment of institutions such as Sabbath schools would hasten Christ's return.[49] Similarly, the Rev. Matthew La Rue Perrine declared that the creation of the Female Missionary Society "indicates the return to the primitive order and zeal, and the approaching splendours of the millennial day." According to Perrine, one had to look back to the New Testament's example of Euodias and Syntche—two female leaders of the church in Philippi—to find a similar effort on the part of women to send preachers to the poor. In his mind, this revitalization of the spirit of the early church meant that Christ was preparing his flock for his final return.[50]

The boldest predictions of the Millennium came from the Marine Missionary Society. Its supporters wrote and spoke in apocalyptic language that foresaw a prominent role for sailors in the last days. John Romeyn's 1819 sermon to the society suggested that the conversion of sailors was part of God's plan to spread the gospel. By acting as missionaries and distributing Bibles from port to port, sailors could become God's global messengers and bring about the Millennium. Not only could they bring Christianity to places such as Africa, India, the South Sea Islands, but they could also aid in the calling of the Jews around the world that would herald the Second Coming. At the same time that the sailors were spreading the Gospel, they could also bring democracy and the "spirit of liberty" to "conquered" nations. Since commerce is usually hindered by "despotic" governments, he argued, this change would improve

---

[49] Stafford, *New Missionary Field*, 19.
[50] Matthew La Rue Perrine, *Women Have a Work to do in the House of the Lord: A Discourse Delivered at the First Annual Meeting of the Female Missionary Society for the Poor of the City of New York and its Vicinity* (New York, 1817), 25-26.

trading relationships between the United States and the rest of the world, thus incidentally improving the American economy.[51]

The Rev. Edward Griffin wrote of a "republic of mariners" whom God had chosen to reform and serve as his messengers. He, too, believed that sailors could be used to spread the gospel to different parts of the world. The United States should imitate the English institutions that converted sailors and used them for this purpose. Under these new circumstances, ships would no longer merely be carriers of cargo or platforms for weapons. Now they could also become "floating chapels," distributing tracts and Bibles to the "heathen." Once sailors underwent moral reformation under the guidance of the Marine Society, they would be able to engage in the highest calling: the "reformation of the world."[52]

Millennial expectation provided the reformers with their sense of optimism and urgency. Their main tool was the Gospel, which could be used to eliminate some forms of poverty and ultimately transform New York into a moral, industrious and prosperous city. Members argued that if the poor were converted—or at least learned how to live piously—they would avoid the vices that bred poverty. According to this logic, the Gospel properly preached and sincerely accepted could "reform" the behavior of the poor and ultimately turn them into self-sufficient and productive members of society.

---

[51]Romeyn, *A Sermon*, 14, 23.
[52] Griffin, *The Claims of Seamen*, 6, 16-17.

City Missions and Social Reform

The missionaries' attempt to evangelize the poor inevitably led them to re-evaluate the causes of poverty. Ironically, a dogmatic and patronizing attitude towards the poor led the second wave of reformers into more intimate contact with the objects of their ministrations. Stanford and Ely, in particular, visited the homes of the poor, listened to their stories, and ultimately came to feel a great deal of compassion for these individuals. Although they continued to argue that sin was a source of poverty, they also began to place the blame on other factors such as low wages, extortionate rents, and inadequate poor relief policies. These inequalities and institutional failures also contradicted the ideals of the new Republic and needed to be addressed if the city—no less the nation—was to become an example of Christian piety and prosperity. The ministers concluded that much more than spiritual reformation was needed to improve the lives of the poor. The economic issues that led to poverty also needed to be addressed. Stanford and Ely ultimately would become vocal social critics who incorporated economic and institutional reform into their mission efforts.

Ezra Stiles Ely's journal entries of his visits to the almshouse often contained instances of social criticism. In one instance, he recorded the plight of a widow with ten children who tried to make a living sewing shirts and pantaloons. Her meager wages, however, were not enough to feed her large family or pay the twenty-five dollar annual rent for her single-room apartment. As a result, she ended up in the almshouse. Ely did little to hide his frustration over the widow's situation which, in his mind, was due to her low wages and the manufacturer's disproportionately high profit margin: "So that

poor widows who will support themselves must be content with *one shilling*, while the purchasers pay *many shillings* for the same work." Arguing for a more equitable arrangement, he added, "All who sell ought to have lawful gain, but the poor, who perform the work, ought to receive at least half of that sum which is charged."[53]

John Stanford's work preaching to prisoners similarly committed him to increasingly elaborate programs of prison reform, which he advocated on humanitarian, evangelical, and pragmatic grounds all at once. Justifying his commitment to such an unpromising group as the inmates of the state prison, he argued that all "in confinement" needed spiritual instruction, for "prisoners as well as those at liberty have guilty souls to be saved." Prisoners were just as worthy of his efforts as traditional objects of charity. He was very clear that his goal was to not only to convert these prisoners but also to perform a public service by transforming them into productive citizens: "Sincerely I do wish that the Lord would soften some of these hard and rugged hearts, that they might abandon their depraved paths and become virtuous members of society!" As a result, he spearheaded a movement to establish schools in the state prison to teach the residents practical skills such as reading and writing as well as to offer them Biblical instruction. Stanford noted his success on a number of occasions, particularly in the case of B___n E___ms, an eighteen-year-old youth in the state prison. According to Stanford, the prisoner came from a "respectable" family and had received an education, but "like too many unguarded young persons he professed an early disposition to see what he called the world." Eventually, this young man "became prey to those fatal snares" and ended up in prison. This experience transformed his life,

---

[53] Ely, *Journal of the Stated Preacher*, 33.

however, and he improved his education during his fifteen months of confinement. Hopeful for this man's future, Stanford believed that B___n E___ms would become "useful to society after liberation."[54] Sadly, the young man became ill and died before he could leave prison, but his example demonstrates Stanford's assumption that he was not only reforming individuals but also improving society as a whole.

Stanford eventually developed an ambitious prison reform plan based on his years of experience visiting the state prison. He praised the United States' prison system as the most benevolent and humane system of confinement—particularly when compared to European institutions—but argued that further reform was still necessary. In addition to establishing schools for the prison's inmates, he demanded changes in the ways that the prison handled its youthful residents. Commonly in prisons all of the men were housed together—including minors—without provisions for special accommodations or education. To make matters worse, the young men and boys in the prison were often there merely on charges of vagrancy and had not committed any serious crimes. Stanford argued that when housed with the older, hardened criminals, the young people became corrupt and often fell into a life of serious crime that they may have otherwise avoided. In a report to the Board of Inspectors of the State Prison, he outlined a plan for a separate asylum for the vagrant youth that would keep them from the dangerous influences of adult criminals and allow provision for their education and religious instruction. In his mind, at least a few of the boys could possibly be rescued: "As all the eggs of criminality and mischief are laid and hatched, the boys, at any rate,

[54] State Prison Report, January 1, 1825, John Stanford Papers, New York Historical Society.

will be here sequestered from the more daring and wicked men."[55] Stanford hoped that these prison reforms would result in a decrease in crime and create a class of law-abiding citizens who would benefit the community.

The preachers of the Marine Missionary Society similarly reconsidered the prevailing attitude toward sailors. Both Romeyn and Griffin argued that New York was in fact indebted to its mariner population. Sailors were crucial to the port's economy. Their labor made sure that commerce continued and that goods were in plentiful supply. "Their services bring us wealth and prosperity," Griffin declared. "The commercial world are in great arrears to this class of men." According to Romeyn, however, this "highly useful class of our fellow men" was in need. Not only did they make meager wages while the merchant class grew rich from their labor, but they were also in a state of spiritual and moral decay. As a result, it was the duty of the entire community to support the society's efforts to aid these men.[56]

Romeyn and Griffin also argued that reformation of the sailing community was in the city's best interests because it would lead to economic growth. According to Griffin, if religion could bring sailors out of their state of "ignorance, profligation and insubordination," then they would be more productive laborers. They would become "intelligent, sober men" who were "obedient to their superiors."[57] Business, and the port's economy in general, would thrive as a result of the missionaries' work. This economic argument was meant to appeal to individuals who may not have been

---

[55] Report to the Board of Inspectors of the State Prison, 1821, John Stanford Papers, New York Historical Society.
[56] Griffin, *The Claims of Seamen*, 13; Romeyn, *A Sermon*, 19-21.
[57] Griffin, *The Claims of Seamen*, 14.

particularly concerned about the spiritual health of sailors but who were interested in seeing the economy of the new Republic prosper.

Conclusion

The second wave of benevolence differed from the first by redefining the notion of "worthy poor" and addressing, if in limited form, the need for social reform. The scale of the reformers' ambitions was vast: the leaders of the city mission movement claimed that their efforts at reforming the poor could be enlarged and applied to society as a whole. Stafford claimed that humans could perfect the communities in which they lived: "It is not in the power of man to change the heart, but it is in his power to use those means, which, with the ordinary blessing of God, will change the state of society...to make people so intelligent, industrious and moral that they will have little need of charity or civil law." The spread of churches and other religious institutions to poor neighborhoods would "purify" the areas, keeping out taverns and brothels. People would thus spend less money at the tippling house, fewer inhabitants would slip into the state of pauperism, and the city government would save money on poor relief. The result would be an improved society consisting of sober, moral, pious and industrious citizens.[58]

The increasing prevalence of the notion that moral reform was the solution to the city's poverty crisis and the reformers' gradual drift toward perfectionism changed the way that some philanthropists viewed established charities. Stafford argued that

---

[58] Stafford, *New Missionary Field*, 42.

traditional forms of charity—such as the distribution of cash, fuel and clothing—only perpetuated poverty. In his opinion, charities that provided material aid to the poor often promoted the very vices that led to indigence. If people believed that they would receive charity, they would no longer have an incentive to work. Idleness, the "parent of vice," would prevail, thus making the problem of dependence even more severe. Stafford went as far as to suggest that some of the poor should be denied material aid: "It is certain that it would be better for many of those who are relieved by charity if no provision were made for them." A better solution, he argued, was the reformation of their behavior. If they could learn habits of industry and piety, they would be able to find employment and provide for themselves permanently.[59]

This line of thinking would dominate the new charities and poor relief programs that emerged throughout the next decade. Traditional charities, such as the Orphan Asylum Society (OAS) and the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children (SRPW) were placed on the defensive. These older, established organizations would continue to distribute direct relief, but a number of their members would attempt their own reform programs in response to criticism from the more strident evangelicals. The most significant of these efforts was the Magdalen Society, an asylum for prostitutes founded by members of the Humane Society, the SRPW, and the OAS in 1812. The formation of this organization and its efforts will be explored in the following chapter.

---

[59] Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

"POLLUTED WOMEN, FRAIL SISTERS, AND REPENTANT MAGDALENS": PROSTITUTION AND MORAL REFORM

In 1811 Ezra Stiles Ely began to keep a record of his visits as the stated preacher to the residents of the almshouse and City Hospital. Published in 1812, this collection of observations, anecdotes, and commentaries offered the citizens of New York a unique window into the daily life of the city's indigent population. Ely's entries frequently included the unhappy stories of young prostitutes who, weakened by disease, had withdrawn into one of these public institutions either to find treatment or to die. The case of a young woman, "M.D.," particularly struck him as both pitiful and noteworthy. M.D., a "beautiful girl of only fifteen years of age," had come to the hospital for treatment of a fever, but Ely suspected that her sickness was the result of promiscuous sexual activity. After winning her confidence, Ely discovered that M.D.'s two older sisters had encouraged her to follow their example into a life of vice and pleasure. Her eldest sister—whom Ely termed the "syren"—had "seduced" the impressionable girl by taking her to a dancing house and introducing her to a "gallant." Eventually, M.D. agreed to become this man's mistress, thus beginning—according to early nineteenth-century definitions of morality—a downward spiral into the "pit" of prostitution.[1]

---

[1] Ely, *Journal of the Stated Preacher,* 57-60.

Now ill, M.D. displayed sorrow and regret for her past actions. Her contrition, however, presented Ely with a dilemma. He did not want to return the girl to her father's house where she would once again be under the influence of her sisters. He lamented the fact that the city did not offer such women a refuge or a "retreat" where they could avoid "temptation" and undergo reform. "What has been done to restore the fallen females of this city?" he asked his readers. "To which of them has any benevolent society proffered protection?" According to his estimates, which may have been overstated, more than seven thousand females were engaged in prostitution in the city, yet no one had offered this large group any assistance. He called upon his Christian readers to establish some sort of private association that would provide an asylum for women who wished to change their lives. Pointing to the example of London's Magdalen Asylum, he urged benevolent citizens to supply the city's prostitutes with medical treatment, job training, and moral instruction. Without help from New York's religious community, he argued, women such as M.D. would quickly overcome feelings of guilt and "return to their wallowing in sensuality."[2] Ely's call found a receptive audience and the following year a group of middle-class men and women—many of whom had been involved in other benevolent enterprises—organized New York's first Magdalen Society. The Society quickly established an "asylum" to shelter and reform penitent prostitutes like M.D.

Although the Magdalen Society was short-lived, its policies provide important insight into Early National attitudes about women, sex, poverty, and the role of religious denominations in society. First, middle-class reformers believed that prostitutes—and

---

[2] Ibid.

sexually active unmarried women in general—were above all victims. Whether victims of a deceptive "seducer" or of their own "lustful nature," these women were seen as merely passive participants in the complex business of the sex trade. This assumption that the "poor," in this case prostitutes, lacked individual moral agency was unusual for the time and not shared by other benevolent organizations—particularly those in the first wave of benevolence. Second, the reformers drew a direct link between prostitution and poverty. Some argued that poverty bred prostitution, that the inability to support themselves drove many women into such an occupation. Others claimed, instead, that prostitution brought about poverty in that it impoverished both the women who sold their bodies and their customers. Nevertheless, all the reformers agreed that the two problems of prostitution and poverty were connected, and campaigns against one usually involved action against the other. Third, and most importantly, the emergence of New York's Magdalen Society demonstrates that middle-class reformers viewed prostitution as a *moral* problem that fell under the jurisdiction of the religious community. The Magdalen Society was to be another device to reinforce evangelical Protestantism's semi-official position as moral guardian of the public.

In the Magdalen Society the first and second waves of benevolence came together. The founders of the society were a combination of individuals who directed the older relief organizations such as the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children and members of evangelical organizations such as the Society for Supporting the Gospel Among the Poor, but they were now addressing the old problem of poverty in a new and revolutionary way. Instead of providing direct relief or attempting to convert the poor, these reformers were battling poverty by targeting what

they considered to be a very specific vice. Like the missions of the second wave of benevolence, the Madgdalen Society expanded the category of the "worthy poor" to include prostitutes, who traditionally had been considered beyond the reach of evangelical appeal. It is important to note, however, that they concentrated their efforts on reforming only the *women* who worked as prostitutes rather than the men who frequented them. Although the society eventually disbanded, this crusade against prostitution was a unique step in the struggle against poverty in New York City and demonstrated that reformers believed that the collective moral reform of a strategically placed segment of society—in this case, prostitutes—was a key component in their general struggle against poverty.

Prostitution in New York City

Prostitution was a highly visible and public phenomenon in New York in the Early National Period. Foreign visitors often noted the prominence of prostitutes in the streets, on the wharves, near theaters and in dance halls. Francis Hall, a British traveler who visited New York between 1816 and 1817, commented on the city's state of "dissipation." After a disappointing trip to the theater, he politely remarked that although a few women had attended the performance, he "saw nothing resembling a Lady in the house."[3] Similarly, Moreau de St. Méry's travel journal from 1794 revealed his shock at the large number of "streetwalkers" and "houses of debauchery" in the city. He noted that "women of every color can be found in the streets, particularly after ten

[3] Francis Hall, *Travels in Canada and the United States in 1816 and 1817* (London, 1819), 13.

o'clock at night, soliciting men and proudly flaunting their licentiousness in the most shameless manner."[4] Whether on the streets or in bawdy houses, prostitutes conducted their business so openly that the sex trade had become just one more activity in this bustling commercial center.

The typical prostitute was a young single woman, either white or free Black, who resorted to prostitution on an occasional basis to bolster her small income derived from other sources or because she suffered from periods of unemployment. Although contemporary sources provide imprecise and often conflicting estimates, Raymond Mohl concludes that between 1,200 and 7,000 women worked in the profession in any given year after 1810.[5] Many prostitutes worked in the daytime as seamstresses, servants or milliners. At night, however, they would earn extra money as streetwalkers, courtesans or bawdy-house women. The bulk of their customers consisted of sailors, soldiers, travelers, and transients, as well as middle-class men and boys who were willing to venture into the outskirts of the city. Most houses of prostitution were located in waterfront areas on the east side of Manhattan Island, particularly East George Street and on Corlear's Hook. Aspiring customers, however, could also find prostitutes in taverns scattered throughout various neighborhoods or in an area on lower Broadway mockingly called the "Holy Ground"—a few blocks of land behind St. Paul's that was owned by Trinity Parish but was nonetheless dominated by the sex trade. Courtesans, in contrast, usually reserved themselves for better paying customers in theaters, hotels and concert halls. Although all were engaged in prostitution, the

---

[4] *Mereau de St. Méry's American Journey,* 156.
[5] Mohl, 31. The larger figure of 7,000 is based on statistics compiled by reformers and may have been exaggerated for rhetorical purposes.

experiences of these women varied: some attained a degree of economic independence while others encountered only degradation and abuse.[6]

Prostitution was not illegal, per se, in the New York of the time, but local and state authorities attempted to control the practice by arresting suspect women for either "vagrancy" or "disorderly" behavior in general. Municipal officials only considered prostitution to be a nuisance if it disturbed the "peace" or disrupted social order.[7] Watch officers—the city's first police force—would raid bawdy houses only if neighbors complained about noise. The Common Council received numerous petitions each year from residents who demanded prosecution of these houses. The residents on Thomas Street, for instance, petitioned the Common Council in 1809 requesting that the city investigate the "irregular and licentious conduct of certain keepers of houses of ill fame" in their neighborhood. Similarly, the inhabitants of East George Street complained in 1808 that they had been "incommoded by a number of Houses of ill fame."[8] In such cases, the neighborhood complained because these houses violated state and city laws against *disorder*, not about the business they conducted. Nonetheless, local authorities routinely arrested numbers of prostitutes in their periodic round-ups of drunkards, revelers, and other "disorderly" persons.

Keepers of noisy brothels, however, were not the only individuals accused of disruptive behavior. The watch also targeted single women they found walking the streets alone. These women were assumed to be prostitutes and as such faced arrest

---

[6] Stansell, 14-15, 176; Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1992), 25-27.
[7] Timothy J. Gilfolye, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1987), 22-23.
[8] *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1784-1831*, vol. 5 (New York, 1917), 425; *Minutes of the Common Council*, vol. 3, 393.

under the city's vagrancy laws. According to a report in the *Medical Repository of Original Essays and Intelligence,* the city had arrested 504 prostitutes under the Vagrant Act in 1802 alone.[9] An 1816 state law took these prosecutions one step further and allowed the police to remove the children of prostitutes from their parents and place them into the almshouse. Once incarcerated, the commissioner of the almshouse would be able to bind these children out to other families or businesses without the consent of their parents.[10]

When laws failed to control prostitution to the public's satisfaction, mob or vigilante justice could be employed. One of the most famous of these incidents occurred on the night of October 16, 1793. This particular attack targeted the house of "Mother Carey" a famous bawdy-house operator. According to contemporary accounts, after a local artisan's daughter had been raped in the establishment, an angry mob entered the house, broke all of the furniture, and attempted to tear down the building. Next, the group turned on another infamous establishment—the house of "Mother Giles." A "Notice" in the *Daily Advertiser* claimed that the mob consisted primarily of "boys, apprentices, Negroes and sailors," but it also mentioned the presence of "respectable citizens" who watched with approval—and in all likelihood may have participated. Local officials had trouble dispersing the angry crowd, which even threatened the mayor when he tried to intervene.[11] Similar attacks would occur in the

[9] "Means By Which Diseases From Hard Drinking and Venereal Virus are Promoted," *The Medical Repository of Original Essays and Intelligence* 7 (May-July 1803): 91.
[10] *New York Weekly Museum*, March 30, 1816, p. 351.
[11] *Mereau de St. Méry's American Journey*, 312; *Daily Advertiser*, October 17,1793.

following decades, demonstrating that the inhabitants of the city did not always tolerate the existence of prostitution in their neighborhoods, despite its legality.[12]

The Origins of the Magdalen Society

The various legal and "extra-legal" steps to limit and regulate prostitution were not enough in the eyes of religious reformers, who wanted to eradicate prostitution by preventing young women from joining their ranks and by "redeeming" those already fallen. Reform-minded members of New York's middle class established the Magdalen Society in 1812 and erected an "asylum" to house penitent prostitutes the following year. Prostitutes who wished to give up their profession could find refuge in the asylum, where they could learn a trade and receive a minimal education.

The Magdalen Society grew out of the benevolent movement's attempts to confront the overall nature of the problem of poverty in New York. Because the founders of these organizations had always stressed that sin and poverty were linked in a vicious cause-and-effect cycle, they argued that both problems needed to be addressed simultaneously. Prostitution, for the Magdalen Society, was one of the many "sins" that both produced and resulted from poverty. The society's first annual report placed economic circumstances at the top of the list for the causes of prostitution. Many young women, it argued, had been "driven into this abandoned course by the pressure of poverty, by unexpected distress, or by the fascinations of a seducer."[13] At the same time, reformers argued that prostitution led to additional sins and immorality, such as

[12] According to Gilfoyle, major brothel riots also occurred in 1799, 1801, 1807 and 1812.
[13] *First Annual Report of the Magdalen Society of New York* (New York, 1813), 8.

drinking, theft and gambling. In combination these mutually reinforcing vices drove poor men and women deeper and deeper into poverty.

The founders of the Magdalen Society argued that the very existence of the new Republic was in danger. They feared that if the sex trade were permitted to continue, its influence would spread beyond the cities into the countryside and eventually corrupt the entire populace. The members pointed to the open presence of prostitutes in the streets and the unabashed proliferation of bawdy houses on the waterfront as evidence that the city was already in a state of severe moral decline. They hoped that they could rid the city of prostitution by targeting what they believed to be the source of the problem: the prostitutes themselves. If prostitutes could be encouraged to give up their trade, they argued, then the moral decay would be reversed. The members of the Magdalen Society hoped that through religious instruction and vocational training they could reform these "fallen" women and help them to earn a living through "respectable" means, thereby reversing the city's moral descent and preserving the integrity of the new Republic.

New York's Magdalen Society drew upon the example of London's Magdalen Hospital for Penitent Prostitutes. This British society had been established in 1758 by a number of merchants including Jonas Hanway, founder of the London Marine Society (see Chapter Three). Hanway and other philanthropic merchants believed that their charitable institutions would improve the British nation economically and morally, especially during the crisis created by the Seven Years War. In the case of the Magdalen Hospital, the reformers hoped to "rescue" and rehabilitate prostitutes in order to turn them into "useful" and "productive" subjects as wives, mothers, and workers.

At the time of the creation of New York's Magdalen Society, the Magdalen Hospital in London was thriving, but British philanthropists still felt the need to increase their efforts. Fearing a rise in the number of prostitutes in London, reformers created six new institutions in addition to the original hospital. Although they were anything but republicans, like their American counterparts they assumed that the "moral pollution" caused by prostitution would threaten the social order and hoped that their institutions would remedy the problem.[14]

The founders of New York City's Magdalen Society were familiar with the history of the Magdalen Hospital and modeled their own policies of admission, discipline, and reform after those of the London institution.[15] The London society only admitted "penitent" women and provided them with housing, religious instruction, education, medical care, and employment. Ultimately, the administrators hoped that the women could someday return to their families, find employment as domestic servants, or in the best cases, find husbands.[16] The Magdalen Society of New York imitated this rehabilitative approach and recreated many of the London institution's administrative and strict disciplinary policies.

New York's Magdalen Society even adopted the same attitudes and assumptions about prostitution as the British reformers. The founders of both institutions only targeted a select group of women whom they considered "redeemable." Some prostitutes, they argued, had been hardened beyond redemption by their own sin and

---

[14] James Stephen Taylor, *Jonas Hanway, Founder of the Marine Society: Charity and Policy in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London: Scolar Press, 1985), 76-77; Williams, 90-91.
[15] *Third Annual Report of the Magdalen Society of New York* (New York, 1815), 11-12.
[16] *An Account of the Rise, Progress and Present State of the Magdalen Hospital for the Reception of Penitent Prostitutes* (London, 1776), 12-13; *A Short Account of the Magdalen Hospital* (London, 1807), 5, 9-10.

lust. Others, however, had become prostitutes only because financial desperation had forced them to sell their bodies. A common story found in the records of both the British and New York societies told of young girls who had been "deceived" by a lover who had promised marriage in exchange for sex. In each case, this unscrupulous "seducer" abandoned the poor girl after corrupting her morals and ruining her reputation. Rejected by her family and friends, the young woman had no other choice but to support herself through the sex trade. This type of woman—once virtuous, but now "fallen" through her own naivety—was the ideal candidate for the reformers on both sides of the Atlantic.[17]

The London institution enjoyed far more success and far greater longevity than its counterpart in New York. While the Magdalen Society only lasted four years, London's Magdalen Hospital did not close its doors until 1958. Moreover, the British institution could boast a higher success rate. From its founding in 1758 to 1775, the hospital admitted 1,637 women. In 1807, that number would reach 3,775. Of that number, 2,468 were "reconciled to friends," placed into domestic service positions or employed in other "industrious occupations." The others either died, were placed in the lunatic hospital, discharged for "improper behavior" or discharged "at their own request."[18] The largest number of women to reside in New York's asylum at any given time was fewer than ten.

---

[17] *The Rules, Orders and Regulations of the Magdalen House for the Reception of Penitent Prostitutes* (London, 1759), 4-5.
[18] *An Account of the Rise, Progress and Present State of the Magdalen Hospital*, 6; *A Short Account of the Magdalen Hospital*, 13.

Running the Asylum

Unlike other charitable organizations, which were either exclusively male or female enterprises, both men and women participated in governance of the Magdalen Society. Their respective responsibilities, however, were sharply differentiated and gender-specific. Male members occupied the main offices of president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, and served on the Board of Managers. They performed all of the administrative duties, such as keeping records, procuring ministers, hiring physicians, finding employment for the Magdalens, and purchasing "necessaries." A select group of seven men formed a "Standing Committee," a group of managers chosen to visit the asylum. Their duty was to monitor the house's progress as well as "inspect the conduct" of its residents.[19]

The Society also organized a "Committee of Ladies" to "superintend the economy" of the asylum. The Society reasoned that as women, these members were better suited to the daily governance of the asylum because they were more "knowledgeable" in terms of the "female character" and had experience running their own households. In contrast to their male associates, these women had frequent contact with the women in the asylum, supervising their employment, regulating their dress, and composing weekly reports on their progress. The Committee of Ladies was also required to "inspect the conduct" of the Magdalens and "prevent abuses in the internal

---

[19] *Constitution and By-Laws of the Magdalen Society of New York* (New York, 1812), 7; *First Annual Report of the Magdalen Society*, 4.

economy of the house."[20] Female members thus engaged in the domestic activities of the asylum, directly supervising the Magdalens and attending to the daily needs of the household. In 1815 the managers resolved to grant this committee sole authority over admissions. Women were the best judges in these cases, they argued, because their "sex and knowledge of the female character render them the most competent to decide on this delicate point."[21]

Members of the Magdalen Society involved in other benevolent enterprises drew upon their various experiences in organizing the asylum. Thomas Eddy, founder and wealthy merchant, had been involved with the establishment of the Humane Society and the Society for the New York Hospital. The Society's vice president, John Murray, Jr., had served on the hospital board as well. A number of the society's managers, such as Divie Bethune and J.E. Caldwell, also had extensive experience in the organizations that made up the first wave of benevolence. The Society's female members such as Isabella Graham, Sarah Hoffman, Mary Chrystie, Catherine Few and Joanna Bethune were similarly involved with organizations such as the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children or the Orphan Asylum Society. Their experience with these other organizations, particularly the Orphan Asylum, made their participation critical to the success of this enterprise.

The Society's efforts centered on the operations of the Magdalen House, the asylum that provided housing for the women. The managers hired a man and a woman—a "Steward" and "Matron"—to supervise the house at an annual salary of

---

[20] *Constitution and By-Laws of the Magdalen Society of New York*, 7-8; *First Annual Report of the Magdalen Society*, 4.
[21] *Third Annual Report of the Magdalen Society*, 10.

$180 combined. This couple, however, only worked for a few months and in November of that year for unclear reasons left the asylum. After their departure, the house was always directed by another "Matron" and a female "Assistant," both characterized as being "persons of respectable character and approved piety." The matron and her assistant visited the Magdalens' rooms, distributed clothing, and supervised the women's work. Men no longer had any direct contact with the house or its inmates. [22]

According to its constitution, the purpose of the Society was to provide aid to *repentant* prostitutes. The members hoped that the prostitutes under their care would follow the legendary example of Mary Magdalen, who, in a conventional reading of the Gospels, had rejected her life as a prostitute to become one of Christ's most devoted disciples. The women who agreed to abandon their profession and promised to reform their lives would receive the "support" and "protection" of the Society in the form of shelter, clothing, food, moral guidance and honest employment. For their part, the members pledged to "cherish [the Magdalens'] penitent dispositions, inspire them with the principles of religion and virtue, confirm them in the habits of order and industry, and, under the divine blessing, produce them in a radical reformation of life."[23] The goal of the Society was a complete personal and spiritual transformation of the Magdalens.

Those who failed to repent were denied assistance altogether and those who returned to prostitution after spending time in the asylum lost all claim to further aid.

---

[22] *Constitution and By-Laws of the Magdalen Society*, 8-9; *First Annual Report of the Magdalen Society*, 4.

[23] *Consitution and By-Laws of the Magdalen Society*, 3; *First Annual Report of the Magdalen Society*, 3.

An example from 1812 reveals the society's rigid adherence to this policy. The woman in question had lived in the asylum for a period of time but for undisclosed reasons returned to the City Hospital and then fled. According to the managers she "probably reverted to her former licentious mode of life." As a result, this woman "forfeited all future help" from the society.[24] Genuine and consistent repentance was requisite of all Magdalens. Those who stumbled did not find clemency.

The "asylum," or house, of the Society provided a controlled environment in order to create a "refuge from the snares and entanglements of a vicious course." The building itself sheltered the Magdalens and provided a physical barrier that separated them from the haunts of their former lives, particularly the city's bawdy houses and taverns. Here, within the walls of the asylum, the Society could monitor the women, supervise their employment and supply them with spiritual education.[25] On the one hand, this arrangement offered the Magdalens a space in which they could begin their lives anew. On the other hand, the isolated atmosphere of the house allowed the Society to exert a great deal of control over their pensioners.

Despite their best efforts to seclude the Magdalens in a virtuous environment, the managers continued to fear that insincere or "dishonest" women could contaminate the purity of the house. As a result, the Society attempted to raise money to rent "probationary wards" that would serve as temporary residences for prospective candidates. Such women would be out of the bawdy house or off the street but still far removed from the reformed Magdalens. These "trial terms" would allow the Committee of Ladies to screen applicants and judge their sincerity before admitting

[24] *First Annual Report of the Magdalen Society*, 6.
[25] Ibid., 3-4.

them to the main house.[26] In addition, the society created a strict set of rules to regulate the residents' behavior: Magdalens could not receive visitors, they were required to observe strict bed times, the matron inspected all letters and messages sent and received by the residents, and no Magdalen was able to leave the premises unless accompanied by a "trustworthy female."[27] Again, the society's aim was to erect barriers between the Magdalens and potential corrupting influences.

One of the Society's most pressing concerns was finding alternative employment for former prostitutes. These women were held to have turned to prostitution in the first place because they had previously been "deprived of the means of procuring honest employment." To remedy this problem, the members vowed to "confirm them in habits of order and industry." It was not enough to merely give the women jobs, however. Instead, the women had to undergo a "radical reformation in life," including a reformation of their work habits. The members held the assumption that a lack of discipline and diligence was what kept these women in the world of prostitution. The Society reasoned that "honest" work would prepare the women for "future usefulness" and transform them into productive members of society.[28]

Employment of the Magdalens would also lessen the expenses of the asylum. As with other benevolent societies such as the Society for the Relief of Widows with Small Children and the Society for the Promotion of Industry, the members of the Magdalen Society hoped that their institution would become self-sufficient. Among other things, the Magdalens sewed their own clothing, made coverlets, and produced

---

[26] Ibid., 7.
[27] *Constitution and By-Laws of the Magdalen Society*, 13-14.
[28] *Constitution and By-Laws of the Magdalen Society*, 3; *First Annual Report of the Magdalen Society*, 6.

necessary items for the household. Later, the women earned money by sewing, spinning, knitting, and making "sticking cards" for the community. The women apparently also engaged in quilting because the 1813 treasurer's report noted the purchase of a quilting frame. These enterprises, however, succeeded in raising only modest sums of money for the asylum. The Annual Report of 1815 revealed that the Magdalens' work had generated only $158.97, a little over twelve percent of that year's $1,253 budget.[29]

The Society eventually sought permanent work for those Magdalens who appeared to be sufficiently reformed. One of the tasks of the Committee of Ladies was the placement of the women in homes where they could work as servants. Various women from the community who were searching for servants could apply to the society in the hopes of hiring one of the Magdalens. Once the committee determined that such a woman was of "approved character," they would send a Magdalen to work in her home. The Society, however, made sure to continue to monitor the progress of their former residents. The Committee of Ladies required employers to keep an account of their servant's behavior and send a letter to the society each year, reporting on the Magdalen's progress. The committee even preferred to place their Magdalens in homes outside of town in the hope that the women, further away from their old haunts, would also be further removed from temptation.[30]

In addition to employment, the Society aimed to provide the women with "the principles of religion and virtue."[31] The Society encouraged its Magdalens to be pious,

---

[29] *First Annual Report of the Magdalen Society*, 6-7; *Third Annual Report of the Magdalen Society*, 9,14.
[30] *Constitution and By-Laws of the Magdalen Society*, 10-11.
[31] Ibid., 3.

penitent and prayerful. Moreover, the Magdalens were expected to live virtuously. That is, the women needed to possess a high moral character, exhibit a docile attitude, and demonstrate obedience to the matron and the managers. One of the society's most cherished "successes" was a young woman who "conducted herself with utmost discretion" and demonstrated "constant attention to divine things." Her rejection of her past life combined with this newfound piety and virtue enabled her to be dismissed from the house with "honor and universal approbation." After working for a short time in a "respectable" family, she was able to marry a "decent young man." This woman, who was once a prostitute and rejected by polite society, now found—in the eyes of the middle-class reformers—legitimacy in marriage. Her piety and virtue made her the model example of the society's efforts and provided her with "respectability."[32]

The Society established a rigorous regimen to instill piety and virtue into its Magdalens. The matron supervised daily prayers and read a chapter of a sermon to the residents each morning and evening. The managers also employed a minister to attend to the Magdalens' spiritual growth on a regular basis. In most cases, this task was undertaken by John Stanford who, in addition to his regular duties as chaplain for the Society for the Support of the Gospel Among the Poor, visited the asylum every Thursday. To supplement this instruction, the society purchased copies of *Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Mechanics and Servants Magazine*. While the former intended to inspire the spiritual growth of new converts in general, the latter directed its contents specifically to artisan and working-class readers.[33]

---

[32] *Third Annual Report of the Magdalen Society*, 7-8; *First Annual Report of the Magdalen Society*, 6.
[33] *Constitution and By-Laws of the Magdalen Society*, 9; *Third Annual Report of the Magdalen Society*, 8.

Despite the optimism enshrined in the Society's Constitution, by the Third Annual Report of 1815 the managers were expressing their disappointment over the number of failed reform efforts. The descriptions of expulsions, discharges and "escapes" of unrepentant Magdalens outnumbered the accounts of "reformed" prostitutes. Blaming human depravity for these "painful and mournful" episodes, the society resolved to adopt a more stringent admissions policy and promised to increase the discipline within the household. Convinced that "the heart of man is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked," the reformers located the source of the problem in sin—specifically, the "sins" of the Magdalens. The increase in strict rules and heavy monitoring, however, alienated the residents and drove away women who were unwilling to live in such a controlled environment.

"Unhappy Victims": Public Discourse on Prostitution and the Health of the New Republic

The Magdalen Society was not the only group in New York City to address the question of prostitution. The open nature of the sex trade generated a great deal of public discussion in Early National New York and prompted physicians and lawmakers to seek ways in which to remedy what they, too, considered to be a grave social problem. The various moral, legal, and medical discourses took many forms: sermons, pamphlets, essays, law codes, and petitions. A common theme found in all of this literature was the notion that prostitution was dangerous because it created *disorder* in the community—whether it was social, physical or moral. However, while lawmakers and physicians held that prostitution was a necessary evil that might be regulated but

never entirely suppressed, the moral reformers argued that only the wholesale elimination of prostitution would save society. As a result, their tactics were unique.

Legal discourse on prostitution tended to focus on issues of social order, public peace, and particularly the association between prostitution and crimes such as theft and brawling. Legally, prostitutes were defined as "disorderly women" who disrupted the community and posed a moral danger to the rest of the population. In an 1818 court case against Martha and Christopher Boyd, the city charged the two defendants with keeping a "disorderly house" among a long laundry list of other offences. Martha, in particular, was charged with operating a house of prostitution. According to the court brief, the Boyds' boarding house had been a "resort for riotous drunken sailors" who bothered the neighborhood by "singing bawdy songs" and "making a great noise." Despite this reputation, the authorities did not take action against the Boyds until a riot broke out among the sailors in August 1817. At this time, the police acted, arresting the Boyds and two other participants charged with assault and battery. The crux of the case against the Boyds was disturbing the public peace with an "ill-governed" house.[34] The sale of sex in itself was not the offense.

The court eventually acquitted the defendants of all charges—including Martha's charge of keeping a house of prostitution—but the case offers an interesting look at the city's attitude toward disorder and the role of women in the sex trade. The mayor, who heard the Boyds' case, held in his judgment that Martha could not be held personally accountable for the disorder in the house. As "the wife is under the control of the husband," she is powerless to stop him from carrying out any business, legal or

[34] "Martha Boyd's Cases, Indicted with Christopher Boyd, Her Husband, and Christopher Waters and John Williams," *The New York City Hall Recorder* 3, no. 9 (September 1818): 134-136.

otherwise, in his home and could not be held "criminally answerable." However, a wife could be convicted along with her husband for keeping a house of prostitution. This exception to the general rule of nonresponsibility was based on the belief that the administration of a house of prostitution required the "concurrence and participation of the woman."[35] In the eyes of the law, the very nature of prostitution necessitated the involvement of the brothel keeper's wife.

The city's police force similarly viewed prostitutes as disruptive members of society. In 1809, a watch captain reported that his officers had "apprehended and conveyed all loose and disorderly women, or those living as such," to the almshouse. In this particular case, however, one of the women filed a formal complaint claiming that she had been falsely arrested and abused by the captain. In a petition to the Common Council, the captain defended his conduct and emphasized the complainant's unruly behavior. Stressing the "noisy insults" and "abuse" that she had heaped upon him, he maintained that this woman was a "disorderly person" who had been a well-known prostitute in the city for the past three years. He hoped that the "infamy of her character" would discredit his accuser's testimony.[36] Here, the captain pointed to the complainant's disruptive behavior to prove that she was indeed a prostitute. Her bad reputation combined with her behavior at the time she was taken into custody was held to justify her arrest in the general roundup of alleged prostitutes.

The municipal government passed a number of laws aimed at reducing the disorder arising from the sex trade in their community at the very same time reformers

---

[35] Ibid.
[36] Memorial of Thomas Darling, July 10, 1809, Common Council Papers, New York Municipal Archives.

established the Magdalen Society. In many ways their complaints echoed those of the evangelical reformers. Both groups were responding to the heightened fear of disorder stemming from the War of 1812 and the consequent fear for the safety of the Republic. The Act for Suppressing Immorality in 1812 attempted to control prostitution as well as a host of other "destructive" and "immoral" practices plaguing the city. Alarmed by the spread of "Brothels, Houses of Seduction and other disorderly houses," the Common Council vowed to address the "evils" that arose from prostitution. The Council feared that the city's youth, in particular, was susceptible to the influences of such establishments. It was in these houses that "children learn to use the most odious imprecations and obscene language" and other "destructive vices." Acting as the "prudent Parent and faithful Magistrate," the Council vowed to correct these problems and redirect the course of the youth. In the opinion of the Council, the very future of the Republic was at stake. If the next generation was permitted to wallow in vice, then the entire nation would eventually fall into corruption. Guided by the conviction that "righteousness exalteth a nation" and that "sin is a reproach to any People," the city authorities determined to "pay particular attention" to the spread of prostitution.[37]

Officials also tried to control the sex trade by restricting prostitutes to certain regions of the city. In an effort to redefine public space, the police issued a notice in January 1813 warning all prostitutes and keepers of bawdy houses that they must confine their business to streets on the eastern waterfront. This notice, placed in various parts of Corlear's Hook, informed "landlords, tenants and occupants of all houses of ill fame" that they must relocate east of Rutgers Street in order to avoid future police

---

[37] *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York*, vol. 7, 73-75.

harassment. Marilyn Wood Hill, in her study of New York prostitution, notes that city officials were willing to wait to enforce this law until May 1st, the traditional "moving day" in New York—a day in which leases expired and tenants were forced to find alternate housing. This consideration on the part of the police indicates that the city was not in a hurry to enforce this new regulation, but willing to wait until the time was convenient for the inhabitants.[38] Nevertheless, the notice clearly indicates that city officials wanted to isolate prostitution and confine bawdy houses to certain areas in order to limit the amount of "disorder" in the rest of the city.

The medical discourse on prostitution addressed a different form of disorder. In medical journals and essays, physicians expressed alarm over the spread of venereal disease, particularly syphilis. The "Annual Report of Diseases Treated at the Public Dispensary" in 1816 maintained that out of a total of over three thousand patients, the doctors treated forty-five cases of syphilis and "pseudo-syphilis" that year. The list also indicates that the Dispensary handled one case of "nymphomania," listing it under the heading of "chronic diseases."[39] Different physicians offered a variety of treatments for syphilis, including the use of quicksilver ointment, antimony, Dover's powder and tonics.[40] Containing the spread of venereal disease—a *health* disorder—was the primary goal of the medical community and the main topic of their discourse.

A few physicians argued for government regulation of prostitution as a means of halting the spread of venereal disease. In 1803, an author of an essay that appeared in

---

[38] Marilynn Wood Hill, *Their Sisters' Keepers: Prostitution in New York City, 1830-1870* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 28.
[39] "Annual Report of Diseases Treated at the Public Dispensary, New York, During the Year 1816," *The American Monthly Magazine and Critical Review* 1 (New York, May 1817): 68-70.
[40] "Essay on the Use of Quicksilver," *The Medical Repository of Original Essays and Intelligence* 19, no. 1 (1818): 30-32.

the *Medical Repository of Original Essays and Intelligence* criticized the municipal government for its legal tolerance of prostitution. He lamented the fact that prostitutes and keepers of bawdy houses could only face prosecution under laws concerning disorder. "In consequence of this faulty and defective system of police," he argued, "the venereal disease is kept constantly in action and diffused far and wide among both sexes." According to his estimates, at least 1,050 prostitutes worked openly in the city. Moreover, the city contained 160 bawdy houses and dancing halls "frequented by prostitutes and disorderly persons." Because the Health Office lacked the authority to regulate such establishments, the government had no way of controlling the spread of disease. Without regulation, he argued, these "manufactories of syphilitic poison" would continue to pose a great danger to public health.[41] These numbers may have been exaggerated to strengthen the author's point, since the total population of New York City at this time was only 60,000. Nonetheless, this large figure demonstrates that the city's medical community believed that prostitution was rapidly spreading throughout the city and bound to overwhelm the community with disease.

Other physicians linked the spread of syphilis to poverty. Dr. Felix Pascalis, in an 1818 letter to the physicians at the City Dispensary, indicated his concern that syphilis spread most quickly through the "poor and labouring class of society." This group, he argued, was more likely to contract the disease because of their low social and economic status. Material deprivation combined with "ignorance" and "slothfulness"—two traits he considered endemic to the poor—caused such individuals to engage in "indiscriminate sexual intercourse." In his diagnosis, the perceived immorality of the

[41] "Means By Which Diseases From Hard Drinking and Venereal Virus are Promoted," 89-91.

poor was the main culprit behind the spread of the disease. The only solution to this problem, he argued, was to teach the poor and working class "contrary habits" and encourage a "moral delicacy in civilized society."[42]

Although the reformers in their discourse adopted a few of the themes found in legal and medical discussions, their attitude toward the sex trade and the women involved was fundamentally different. Unlike legal and medical writers who emphasized the immediate, pragmatic problems of social disorder and disease, moral reformers focused their discussions on the causes of prostitution and the character of the prostitutes. Reformers were concerned with the moral health of the community and considered the sex trade to be one of the most perilous "sins" infecting the city. Other vices such as intemperance and laziness also contributed to the spread of poverty, but prostitution and its ability to destroy both the men and women who engaged in it were held to be a much more deeply entrenched problem in society. As a result, the reformers pledged to focus on this particular vice by reforming the hearts and minds of the prostitutes themselves. Only by targeting the root cause of the problem—i.e., the sin of the women of the sex trade—could the city hope to quell disorder and halt the spread of disease.

Borrowing language from their British counterparts, the New York reformers placed all prostitutes in either one of two mutually exclusive categories: the helpless "victim" or the moral "polluter." The "victim" was by far the more used designation. In its minutes and reports, the Magdalen Society often referred to prostitutes as "deluded, "misguided," or "unhappy," suggesting that they were passive subjects being

[42] "Essay on the Use of Quicksilver," 30.

acted upon by external influences. In the eyes of the reformers, these women had little agency and little choice in their profession. They were still, however, guilty of sin and needed to be "rescued" from their fates by their more pious neighbors.

In some cases, the Magdalens were victims of a "deceiver" or "seducer." As noted earlier in the chapter, Rev. Ely blamed M.D.'s "syren sister" for seducing her into her profession. Similarly, he discovered that another young girl, "A.W.," had been tricked into prostitution by a duplicitous woman. This woman had traveled into the countryside and happened upon A.W.'s mother, a poor widow burdened with many children. Seizing the opportunity, the woman "duped" the mother with "fine speeches" and convinced her to allow the twelve-year-old A.W. to travel to the city where she could find a job as a chambermaid. The promises of high wages and easy work were too enticing for the mother to resist and she naively sent her daughter along with the woman. Once this "female monster" brought her "prey" to the city, however, her true intentions surfaced and she forced the girl to work as a prostitute. The girl's mother eventually came to New York in search of her daughter, but this "monster" had locked the girl in her chamber and "by force made her drunk with cordials." Ely met A.W. and listened to her story four years later, when she was dying from syphilis in the City Hospital. Her example, in addition to numerous others, proved to him that many prostitutes were indeed victims and required the aid of charity.[43]

A few years later, in 1817, the Rev. Ward Stafford carried the idea of victim further by referring to the city's prostitutes as "voluntary slaves." In a sermon to the Female Missionary Society he warned his listeners that over "six-thousand *abandoned*

---

[43] Ely, *Journal of the Stated Preacher*, 92-93.

[emphasis added] females" resided in the city, many of whom were being "held by their masters in the most abject slavery." He described brothels as "slaughter houses" that imprisoned the neglected women with barred windows. What was worse, he added, was that even children were being "trained up expressly for this polluted traffic." In his mind, these individuals were more than victims. They were now in a state of slavery, unable to free themselves from this life of "vice."[44]

Other women, the reformers argued, were victims not of a seducer but rather of their own weak natures. Although the concept of "Republican Motherhood"—the idea that women's role as mothers instilled them with virtue and was important to the new nation because they would be raising the next generation of citizens—was gaining popularity, many individuals continued to hold to the traditional belief that at least some women were particularly prone to immorality because of innate "weakness" of character. According to Ely, many women became prostitutes because they simply could not resist "temptation." The lure of the exciting life of dance halls, money, and sex was just too strong. Attractive women, in particular, were susceptible to these enticements. After meeting "B.B.," a sick prostitute, he concluded that she was a woman of "too fair a face and form for anyone to possess in such a licentious city." Her youth and beauty ultimately caused her to succumb to the temptation of prostitution. Perhaps if she had an education or possessed the "fear of God," he argued, she may have been able to avoid such a sad fate. As it was, her own personal weakness had led her to this fate.[45]

---

[44] Stafford, *New Missionary Field*, 14-15.
[45] Ely, *Journal of the Stated Preacher*, 22, 65.

The second category of prostitutes that appeared in moral discourse was that of the "polluter." In this case the reformers borrowed the vocabulary and metaphors of the medical community and applied them to what they called *moral pollution.* Immorality, they believed, could work its way through a community like a disease. Just as physicians worried about the spread of epidemics throughout the community, moral reformers feared the contagious effects of vice. The moral reformers use of the words "pollution" and "disease" differed from that of the medical community, however, in that they believed that the moral diseases, such as prostitution, could be eliminated in the community as a whole. Physicians of the period, in contrast, focused on curing or preventing illness on an individual basis and did not envision a total eradication of any given disease.

As a precaution against this type of moral pollution, the society carefully screened all applicants before allowing them to reside in the asylum. The managers feared that "*contamination* [emphasis added] in principle or practice, introduced by persons carelessly or improperly admitted, might in a measure defeat the good already produced" in the other Magdalens. In other words, the Society worried that the presence of unreformed prostitutes in the asylum would threaten to undermine the entire mission. Improper behavior—including disobedience, dishonesty or "hypocrisy"—on the part of even a few residents could spread throughout the household, potentially corrupting the remainder of the women.[46]

This fear of moral contamination reached beyond the asylum and extended to the community at large. Rev. Ely observed that "the morals of many young men are

---

[46] *First Annual Report of the Magdalen Society*, 7; *Third Annual Report of the Magdalen Society*, 3.

corrupted and their health destroyed, by the allurements of those who walk at liberty, spreading the pestilence in all their way."[47] Similarly, the Magdalen Society claimed that prostitutes were "instruments of corruption, perhaps ruin, to youth of the other sex."[48] In these cases, the women acted as the source of pollution and their customers were the victims. Playing the role of temptress, prostitutes used their sexuality to lure and ultimately harm men through disease or immorality. Ely noted that one young man in particular fell victim to the seductions of a scheming woman: "With her much fair speech she caused him to yield, with the flattering of her lips she forced him." He had gone to her "as an ox goeth to slaughter, or as a fool to the correction of the stocks." In this interpretation, the boy this time was blameless, for he fell under the irresistible spell of a dishonest woman. He did not appear to have a choice in the matter. Rather, she *forced* him with her wiles.[49]

Reformers were particularly concerned with the impact of this "pollution" on young men who were thought to be naïve and susceptible to the influences of the brothel. Older men undoubtedly patronized these places, but the managers were only concerned with the fate of the younger generation. These boys represented the country's future—they were the country's future political leaders, fathers and husbands. If they reached adulthood as morally corrupt or diseased, they would not be useful members of society. Thus, it was imperative that the Society protect the entire community from the moral pollution of prostitutes.

---

[47] Ely, *Journal of the Stated Preacher*, 75.
[48] *First Annual Report of the Magdalen Society*, 8.
[49] Ely, *Journal of the Stated Preacher*, 76.

Whether a woman fell into the category of victim or polluter, however, depended on her age. Young prostitutes were generally considered victims, and as a result, reformers focused their efforts on this group. The Magdalen Society preferred to admit girls between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two because their hearts had not yet been "hardened" by their vicious lifestyle. Moreover, these young women deserved pity and understanding because of their tender age.[50]

Older women who had been in the trade for a considerable time or who were diseased, in contrast, were often dismissed as being beyond redemption. The Magdalen Society, for instance, refused admittance to any prostitute who was either pregnant or suffering from venereal disease despite the fact that two physicians who could have treated such women attended the asylum.[51] Ely also wrote of the hopeless situation of older or diseased prostitutes he met in the City Hospital. As he walked through the syphilis wards, he noted that the rooms were filled with "sick and rejected females." One woman in particular, a "mother of harlots," sat in a corner, her body full of sores. "For years," he wrote with contempt, "she has made merchandise of female boarders." This woman, and others like her, were responsible for the corruption of young women such as "A.W." They would delude young girls, force them into prostitution, and begin them on a path that would only end in their deaths. As such, he had little sympathy for this now-dying woman and instead focused his attention on the younger girls. In his opinion, this woman was beyond hope and her face, now distorted by syphilis, "scarcely resembles anything human."[52]

---

[50] *First Annual Report of the Magdalen Society*, 8.
[51] *Constitution and By-Laws of the Magdalen Society*, 10.
[52] Ely, *Journal of the Stated Preacher*, 93.

Conclusion: The Dissolution of the Magdalen Society

Despite their efforts, the reformers ultimately failed to establish a successful and permanent asylum. Admissions declined after the first year, leaving only three Magdalens in the house at the end of 1814. By 1816, the Magdalen Society had disintegrated, leaving the city's "abandoned females" once again abandoned. Apparently, the strict regulations of the house made it an unattractive alternative for prostitutes who were considering forsaking their livelihoods. The Society's greatest failure, however, was its inability to provide the women with satisfactory employment. If the managers' moral proddings failed to stir a change in the women, surely the thought of supporting oneself on the meager wages of a seamstress or house servant did not convince many to renounce their old profession.

One year after the dissolution of the Society, Rev. Ward Stafford decried the continued presence of prostitution in the city. The Magdalen Society may have failed, but this did not mean that the city needed to abandon the idea of an asylum for repentant prostitutes. Using apocalyptic language, he declared "open war" on New York's prostitution problem. Still convinced that the "Gospel of Christ" was the only remedy, he urged Christians to attempt reform once more. It would not be until the following decade, however, that another society would emerge in the city to combat prostitution. Established in 1825, the House of Refuge also provided an asylum for prostitutes, but it enjoyed greater success than its predecessor. Learning from the failures of the Magdalen Society, the founders of the House of Refuge narrowed their efforts to

preventive measures and spent most of their resources on teenage prostitutes and other children who were in danger of resorting to prostitution—particularly poor orphans.[53]

The short-lived experiment of the Magdalen Society was significant because it resulted in the amalgamation of the first two waves of benevolence. Its failure ushered in a new approach to the problem of poverty. In 1817 a new society with much broader aims, the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism (SPP), was created to address a multitude of social problems. Unlike previous benevolent societies, the SPP argued that *pauperism*—that is, the state of being dependent on charity or public aid for survival—could actually be *prevented* if reformers could simply discover its roots. As a result, founders of this new society sponsored investigative projects in order to locate and eventually eliminate the causes of the most extreme forms of poverty. The Society for the Prevention of Pauperism—which will be discussed in the following chapter—was the most revolutionary of the benevolent societies and its methods would change the way that New Yorkers—and the nation as a whole—addressed poverty.

[53] Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 64-66.

CHAPTER V

"WHAT IS EVIL SHOULD NOT ONLY BE DETECTED BUT DEFEATED": THE SOCIETY FOR THE PREVENTION OF PAUPERISM AND THE THIRD WAVE OF BENEVOLENCE

An 1818 report "On the Subject of Pauperism" declared that "misguided benevolence" and "imprudent systems of relief" in New York City had not only failed to improve the economic situation of poor men and women but had also exacerbated the problem of poverty in general. The distribution of food, clothing, cash and other material items by city institutions and private benevolent organizations, the report claimed, had only resulted in increasing dependence on charity and had ultimately prevented the poor from finding the means to become self-sufficient. This rising "helplessness" among the poor created ever-increasing demands for relief, straining the limited resources of the city government and private citizens alike. Focusing on the issue of municipal relief practices, the authors of the report concluded that only a "radical change in the principles upon which public alms have been usually distributed" would forestall an impending social and economic crisis. If traditional practices of poor relief continued without alteration, the report warned, the "present system must fall under its own irresistible pressure, prostrating perhaps, in its ruin, some of the pillars of the social order." The economic health of New York City was at immediate risk, and

the new nation as a whole was destined for eventual collapse under the weight of misguided poor relief policies.[1]

This report was the first of a series of statements published by the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism, a newly established organization dedicated to a single, all-encompassing remedy for New York City's growing problem of "pauperism." A number of members of the city's elite, including banker and former general Matthew Clarkson and merchant Divie Bethune, established the Society in December of 1817. Both Clarkson and Bethune had extensive experience in New York's benevolent and philanthropic societies. Clarkson had been a leading member of the Humane Society, the New York Hospital, and the American Bible Society.[2] Bethune, husband of Joanna Bethune of the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows and the Orphan Asylum Society, had participated in the establishment of the Humane Society and the Magdalen Society. Most of the other members of the SPP had also played leading roles in both private benevolence and public poor relief programs, but like Clarkson and Bethune they had grown dissatisfied with what they considered to be a lack of success in the fight against poverty. The object of their new organization was to find ways to prevent the spread of pauperism—a very specific form of poverty—in the city. Stories of poor widows or suffering orphans would not appear in the new society's reports as a way to evoke sympathy from would-be benefactors. Now, the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism would try to shift the attention of the benevolent-minded away from individual cases of poverty to the larger and more abstract issue of "pauperism." If this

---

[1] *Report of a Committee on the Subject of Pauperism* (New York, 1818), 3-4.
[2] Wilson and Fiske, *Appleton's Cyclopædia of American Biography*, vol. 7, 60; Johnson and Malone, *Dictionary of American Biography*, vol. 2, 166.

approach did not work by itself, the Society would remind New Yorkers of the high cost of public relief programs to taxpayers as further means to win support for its efforts.

The Society for the Prevention of Pauperism defined the term "pauper" as an individual who was "dependent" on "external support" for survival. This external support could come in the form of either private charity or public aid, but in either case, a pauper was, pure and simple, a "public burden."[3] The problem of pauperism, they argued, properly fell under the jurisdiction of public institutions, not private organizations. The purpose of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism was therefore to assist state and city officials in their duties by focusing on an investigation into poverty rather than to continue to distribute what they saw as an endless cycle of relief. The Society organized committees to research the various causes of pauperism and compile a list of remedies for each problem. Ultimately, the Society hoped that such research would "meliorate" the condition of the poor by "stimulating their industry" and "exciting their own energies."[4] At this point the benevolent movement took a novel step in poor relief practice that combined old approaches to poverty with modern methods. Using "scientific" procedures, the committees conducted their research without ever questioning the traditional argument that it was the poor, not the economy or some other external factor, that needed to be reformed. Despite this change in strategy to substitute the systematic study of pauperism for the various ad hoc relief measures of the earlier societies, the belief that poverty was caused by immorality,

---

[3] *Second Annual Report of the Managers of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism in the City of New York* (New York, 1820), 17.
[4] Record Book, "Constitution," Society for the Prevention of Pauperism Papers, New York Historical Society.

laziness, or some other personal deficiency among poor men and women continued to lie at the heart of the benevolence movement.

The creation of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism marked the emergence of the third wave of benevolence. Like the first and second waves, the third was concerned with the moral and economic health of the Republic. Calvinist convictions also continued to be a force in the society, albeit in a limited form as more non-Calvinists filled the membership roles. The theological influence of this new leadership took the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism in a new direction, reducing the emphasis on the inevitability of pauperism and instead focusing on the discovery of preventative measures.

In most ways, the third wave of benevolence marked a significant departure from the first two. Its adherents did not advocate either the distribution of poor relief or proselytization of the poor. Instead, the Society was concerned with investigating the causes of pauperism and implementing the necessary reforms for its prevention. British critics of their own country's poor relief practices provided, in part, inspiration to the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism's founders, but the New York philanthropic community's dissatisfaction with the results of traditional charitable measures served as an equally powerful impetus for change.

Poverty and Pauperism

The members of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism (SPP) made a clear distinction between poverty and pauperism. Poverty, as defined by the society, was a

condition that obliged propertyless men to "labor for subsistence." Wage laborers, sailors, day workers or any person who worked but lived on the margins of subsistence fell into this category. Such a person was "poor" because he or she had the *potential* to succumb to destitution and dependence. Poverty in and of itself was not avoidable nor even necessarily harmful to society. A number of the Society's reports treated social and economic inequality as a natural occurrence in modern civilization. Not only did the "disparity in the physical and intellectual capacities of men" create such differences, but society's recognition of a "division of property" also led inevitably to the distinction between rich and poor.[5]

Since the members of the SPP indicated no inclination to changing this present arrangement of social distinctions, they were willing to accept its incidental effects—including poverty. Indeed they held that poverty was necessary and even "indispensible" to society. Since the poor needed to labor to support themselves, they provided a ready supply of workers. The meager wages of propertyless workers ensured that they would return again and again to the work place in order to provide for themselves and their families. If the exigencies of poverty did not exist, the Society's "Report on Idleness" argued, there would be no incentive for workers to provide the labor necessary to sustain civilization and create wealth. The members did not believe that this form of poverty would even warrant charity if properly controlled. If society—that is, the civil authorities—was able to regulate the morality of the population and

[5] *Report of a Committee on the Subject of Pauperism*, 4-5.

compel it to adopt the healthy behaviors of industry and hard work, then the number of poor would become so insignificant that charity would no longer be necessary.[6]

Pauperism, in contrast, was a distinct, unnatural, and problematic form of the general category of poverty. Pauperism, or indigence, was the state of "want, misery, distress, and approaching ruin" in which individuals could not labor—either out of choice or necessity—and were therefore "destitute of the means of subsistence."[7] Pauperism placed an undue burden on society as indigent men and women exhausted the resources of the almshouse and other institutions of public aid. In time, recipients of economic aid grew dependent on this public and private assistance, thus falling further into a state of "indigence and helplessness" and creating a need for further expenditure of charitable resources. In 1819, the Society estimated that eight thousand paupers resided in New York City out of a total population of over 120,000—far too many for the city's resources to handle.[8] Such individuals were a "burden to the community" as they wantonly used up the tax revenues supplied by the city's employed residents. The members of the SPP argued that such taxes came out of the "coffers of the rich," thus leading to an inappropriate situation in which wealthy New Yorkers were obliged to support their unemployed neighbors.[9]

Pauperism was not just a financial problem according to the SPP—it was an "evil" that needed to be eliminated from society. Like the benevolent societies that preceded it, the SPP argued that pauperism was a moral problem in which sin and

---

[6] *Report to the Managers of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism in New York by Their Committee on Idleness and Sources of Employment* (New York, 1819), 4-5.
[7] Ibid., 5.
[8] *Second Annual Report of the Managers of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism*, 17. The total population of New York City according to the 1820 census was 123,704.
[9] *Report of a Committee on the Subject of Pauperism*, 9.

poverty were directly linked. Sin—whether among individuals or within society as a whole—was the cause of pauperism and had to be purged from the community just as any other dangerous element would be removed. The only way to accomplish this would be to "erect barriers against the encroachments of moral degeneracy." The society also connected pauperism to public health. It was the result of the "diseases of the mind" and came in the form of vices: intemperance, gambling, laziness and ignorance. The Society argued that private philanthropic efforts were unable to "grapple" with a malady that was so deeply ingrained in society. Instead, it was the responsibility of civil authorities to "destroy the root" of this evil.[10]

The SPP divided paupers into two categories: voluntary and involuntary. "Involuntary" pauperism was an unavoidable condition which included the "sick and decrepit." Such individuals would never be able to survive without external support and therefore must be aided by the community. "Voluntary" paupers, in contrast, were "healthy and vigorous" men and women who nonetheless requested charity. As their description suggests, voluntary paupers *chose* to remain in poverty so as to avoid finding steady employment. According to the SPP, voluntary paupers—the "vicious and indolent, the prodigal and intemperate, the depraved and worthless"—could find means to support themselves if they tried, but their unwillingness to be "virtuous and frugal" kept them dependent on charity or public aid. Worse yet, the voluntary paupers who received charity had become so habituated to outside relief that they lost all incentive to work when the opportunity did arise. Both involuntary and voluntary

---

[10] *Report...on Idleness and Sources of Employment*, 3; *Fifth Annual Report of the Managers of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism in the City of New York* (New York, 1821), 6; *Report of a Committee on the Subject of Pauperism*, 9-11.

paupers could be found in the almshouse, orphan asylum, and other benevolent institutions, but it was the latter upon which the Society focused its condemnation and its efforts at reform alike. These individuals were the "burdens" who were "wasting" tax money.[11]

Paupers and the Republic

In the opinion of the SPP, there was little room for paupers, street-beggars or any form of indigence in the new American Republic. In an equitable and republican society that provided opportunities for all, poverty might not be eliminable but the persistence of *pauperism* was anything but inevitable. The United States could escape the fate of its European counterparts, where monarchies imposed exorbitant taxes and legalized social distinctions that made pauperism the common plight for many of their subjects. It would be easy, however, for the newly established nation to neglect a problem such as poverty. The "external characteristics of moral youth and national energy," the Society reported, often drew people's attention from potential crises—including the debilitating effects of pauperism on the country's poor relief system.[12] The United States must be careful, the Society warned, not to become complacent in its successes. The example of England's negligence and carelessness in the realm of poor relief should give warning to the entire country. According to the SPP, England's empire was weakened by its poor laws. Liberal poor relief practices "relaxed the

---

[11] *Second Annual Report of the Managers of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism*, 17; *Fifth Annual Report of the Managers of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism*, 4-7; *Report...on Idleness and Sources of Employment*, 5.

[12] *Second Annual Report of the Managers of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism*, 3.

morals" of the country, "destroyed all anxiety for livelihood" and "unnerved the arm of industry." The English erected many almshouses, provided "indiscriminate" aid, and as a result wasted a great deal of money. The result was that the "productive labor" of the empire was diminished, weakening the entire nation.[13]

The members of the SPP worked under the assumption that pauperism was an unnatural phenomenon in the new republic. Pauperism was a "paradox" in a country with so much "available land," high wages, and low taxes. "A political scientist would look at our country and say that there should not be pauperism," the Fifth Annual Report asserted. The United States instead "should be exempt from the vagrancy and beggary that exists in Europe." The only reason that poor relief existed was because the poor *chose* to "depend on the public."[14] Once again, the SPP coldly placed responsibility for pauperism on indigent men and women. The new country offered many opportunities to workers and farmers, according to the reformers, but "human degeneracy and vice kept individuals from constant employment.[15]

The SPP spoke of eliminating pauperism in nationalistic and even militaristic tones. Speaking of "sentinels" and "walls of defense," the members argued that only moral and religious instruction could halt the spread of pauperism. Such instruction was the "watch-tower of our strength," for it decreased the amount of vice in communities—the main source of indigence.[16] The new nation needed a "moral hero"

---

[13] Ibid., 41-42.
[14] *Fifth Annual Report of the Managers of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism*, 14-15.
[15] *Fourth Annual Report of the Managers of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism of the City of New York* (New York, 1821), 6.
[16] Ibid., 15.

to lead the country in reform. His job would be to research the causes of pauperism and find remedies for these various problems.[17]

Charity and Pauperism

The idea that private charity and public poor relief measures exacerbated the problem of pauperism by creating a dependent class of poor men and women stemmed in part from the writings of British economists and philanthropists who had grown dissatisfied with Britain's relief policies in the late eighteenth century. Some of London's most celebrated charitable institutions, such as the Foundling Hospital, came under attack in the closing decades of the century as philanthropists, economists, and members of Parliament came to see them as total failures. Three of the most influential practitioners of the new discipline of political economy, Henry Home, Robert Malthus, and Joseph Townsend, criticized both public and private forms of relief in Britain. All agreed that poor relief created dependency on the part of the poor and that the institutions that distributed it—whether private or public—needed to be monitored closely to prevent abuses.[18]

New York's SPP concurred. It did not completely discount the efforts of traditional charities such as the Orphan Asylum Society or the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows, but it did hold such organizations to be inadvertently responsible for the spread of pauperism. According to the Report on Pauperism, traditional charities saved countless individuals from starvation and death, but their efforts only prolonged the

[17] Ibid., 5-6.
[18] Innes, 163-166.

poor's dependence on external support. "Is it not the partial and temporary good which they accomplish," the report asked, "more than counterbalanced by the evils that flow from the expectations they necessarily excite...?" Such "evils" as "the relaxation of industry" and "reliance upon charitable aid" kept the poor both unproductive and a "burden" to the community.[19]

The SPP argued that public forms of relief were also to blame for the spread of pauperism. Institutions such as the almshouse undermined the poor's independence by bringing out the "sluggish and degenerate propensities of human nature." Pointing to other cities and countries, including and especially England, the Society argued that governments which provided the best poor relief often had the most paupers. The poor, according to this logic, migrated to the areas that would provide the most generous support, often maintaining the belief that the public would always provide for them. According to the Fifth Annual Report of 1821, New York City's liberal relief programs encouraged such migrations to the city. After all, the amount of public money expended to help the poor had doubled over the previous ten years and the number of residents in the almshouse alone had risen to fifteen hundred. The report claimed that the largest culprit for this increase were "foreigners and their children," who often ended up unemployed and in the almshouse after arriving in the city.[20] Many of these individuals, it was argued, had been drawn to the city in the first place because of its charitable reputation.

The members of the society held that the unintended effect of both private charity and public relief was the "paralysis" of the lower classes. No longer willing to

---

[19] *Report of a Committee on the Subject of Pauperism*, 8-9.
[20] *Fifth Annual Report of the Managers of the Society of the Prevention of Pauperism*, 13-14.

support themselves, poor men and women returned again and again to charity for survival. After all, the Fifth Annual Report argued, it was easier to rely on the public bounty than to work. Even the Commissioners of the Almshouse agreed that their assistance made the poor "lazy." Exposed to all sorts of vice in the almshouse, the residents became "broken down by drunkenness and profligacy," unable to regain their self-sufficiency. The ever more frequent result was "notorious and shameless" dependence.[21]

If charity demoralized the poor, it also served as a deceptive "opiate" for the rich. Believing that they were fulfilling their religious or civic duty by aiding their poor neighbors, upper-class men and women often donated blindly without bothering to examine the real effects of their charity—or the actual causes of poverty. Such individuals clung to "effeminate notions" that pauperism was a natural and inevitable condition in human society. Not so, declared the SPP. Not only was pauperism *unnatural*, but most charity to paupers was not even *Christian*. The Roman Catholic Church was conveniently blamed for having initiated the current practice of "pernicious almsgiving," often calling it "charity" and offering "pardon and salvation" in return for promiscuous donations. Since the Reformation abolished such practices, Protestant nations should no longer feel obligated to help all of the poor—especially paupers. How, then, stop the growth of pauperism without completely abandoning the Christian duty to help the poor? The only suggestion SPP provided was to monitor closely the expenditures of the agencies that distributed private and public relief. Only then could

[21] Ibid., 9,14.

donors be sure that their donations were not going to voluntary paupers and thus contributing to the spread of this public "evil."[22]

One of the few exceptions to "misguided" or "pernicious" charity, according to the SPP, was the Society for the Promotion of Industry (an organization from the first wave of benevolence discussed in Chapter Two), which sought to provide unemployed women with work. The SPP praised the efforts of this society and encouraged the community to support it. "That excellent institution," one report declared, "has already done more to *prevent pauperism* and *relieve indigence* than is generally known or even considered as practical!"[23] The Society for the Promotion of Industry (SPI) had grown out of the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children as an attempt to help the women on its rolls find means of subsistence. By establishing a House of Industry where women could work doing laundry and sewing, the SPI hoped to provide them with steady employment so that they would no longer require charity or public relief. This goal of making poor women self-sufficient meshed well with the SPP's efforts to reduce the number of "dependent" poor. Rather than adding to the problem of pauperism, this particular charity was also working to minimize it through employment programs.

The SPP also offered an alternative to traditional charity. Instead of using money to distribute direct relief to the indigent, the Society would put its resources toward finding ways to prevent pauperism in the first place. "It is now generally admitted," the Sixth Annual Report claimed, "that *one* dollar is more effectually

---

[22] *Report of a Committee on the Subject of Pauperism*, 9; *Fifth Annual Report of the Managers of the Society of the Prevention of Pauperism*, 19.
[23] *Report...on Idleness and Sources of Employment*, 10.

bestowed in *preventing* pauperism, than *ten* in *relieving* it." The money would be better spent if it were used for "saving people from poverty."[24] To this end, the Society vowed to locate the sources of pauperism so that the community would be able to take steps to prevent individuals from falling into indigence.

Investigating Pauperism

The shift away from both direct relief and proselytization in favor of investigating the causes of indigence was due in part to the membership of the SPP. Calvinist reformers from both the first and second waves of benevolence made up a large portion of the membership, but a host of new individuals from different Protestant denominations also joined, adding to the religious diversity of the society. Founding members Thomas Eddy, John Murray Jr., and John Griscom, for instance, were Quakers.[25] All three of these individuals had extensive experience in philanthropy, as the Society of Friends in general encouraged its members to engage in charitable work as one of the testimonies of the profession. These men, along with their Calvinist colleagues, had become disillusioned with the results of the city's public and private poor relief efforts. They began to re-evaluate their assumptions about poverty and were struggling to find alternative methods to deal with this social problem.

According to its constitution, the first objective of the SPP was "to investigate the circumstances and habits of the poor." The Society divided the city's wards into

---

[24] *Sixth Annual Report of the Managers of the Society of the Prevention of Pauperism of the City of New York* (New York, 1823), 3.
[25] M.J. Heale, "The New York Society for the Prevention of Pauperism, 1817-1823," *New York Historical Society Quarterly* 55 (1971): 155.

"very small districts" and appointed several members to each as visitors. The visitors would meet with the families in their district in order to "advise them with respect to their business, the education of their children," and "the economy of their houses."[26] Each group of visitors kept a record book detailing the status of the families in their district. The 1820 record book for Church, Leonard and Franklin Streets, a mixed-class neighborhood in the fourth ward, noted the names of the heads of families, their ages, occupations and character; the name of their Church; and whether or not the family possessed a Bible. In total, the visitors of this district surveyed eighty-two families consisting of three hundred "white persons" and sixty-three "coloured persons." The neighborhood consisted primarily of merchants and artisans with a few households headed by women. The record book also indicates that the majority of people belonged to one of the various Protestant churches in the city and owned a Bible.[27] The SPP hoped to use this type of information to track the city's residents and determine any significant patterns in poor households.

The visitors worked closely with the Commissioners of the Almshouse, the Justices of the Police, and members of other benevolent societies, often providing them with information about specific families. Both "good and bad behavior" were reported to these groups and the visitors vowed to help the city government "bring to punishment the idle and vicious."[28] In these cases, the SPP also concerned itself with crime and disorder—two phenomena the members saw as closely linked to poverty.

---

[26] Record Book, Society for the Prevention of Pauperism Papers, New York Historical Society.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.

In addition to investigating the behaviors of the poor, the Society explored the sources of poverty in the city. Specialized committees studied what they considered to be the causes of poverty, once again demonstrating the assumption that poverty and immorality were connected. Three or four members served on the committees, which each focused on a particular issue such as intemperance, disorderly houses, cleanliness, lotteries, and immigration.[29] Reports such as the "Report on Idleness" and the "Report on Temperance" demonstrated detailed research and offered suggestions of how these "causes" of poverty could be eliminated from society.

The committees collected data in a number of ways. One of the most profitable methods consisted of conducting "interviews" with individuals who were knowledgeable about poverty or one of its various causes—intemperance, gambling, etc. Almost all of the committees made use of city records, whether they were researching the number of juvenile delinquents in the city or the number of establishments holding liquor licenses. For instance, the Committee on Intemperance found after studying city records and legal statutes that in 1819 "1445 persons" possessed licenses to sell liquor. After doing some calculations, the committee concluded that the inhabitants of New York City were spending "$1,642,500" annually on alcohol in groceries and taverns. This number may not have been very high in real terms for the Early National Period, but the committee assumed that it was the poor who frequented these establishments the most and were spending money that they could not spare.[30]

---

[29] Rough Minutes of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism, 1819-1822, November 8, 1821, Society for the Prevention of Pauperism Papers, New York Historical Society.
[30] *Documents Relative to Savings Banks, Intemperance and Lotteries* (New York, 1819), 18.

The SPP also referred to the records of private benevolent organizations including the Society for the Promotion of Industry (SPI). The SPP studied the SPI by examining its history, visiting its House of Industry, and observing the daily operations of the organization's directresses. From this information the Committee on Idleness concluded that the "truly substantial advantages and blessed effects" of the SPI were worthy of public support. Moreover, the committee called on the community to establish a similar House of Industry for unemployed men.[31]

Several committees corresponded with similar organizations in other areas of the country. The committee responsible for researching the benefits of savings banks for the poor wrote to philanthropists in Boston, Salem, Baltimore, and a number of other cities in search of information on savings banks. For instance, in 1819 the committee asked the Boston Society, an organization which had already established a savings institution for the poor in that city, a series of specific questions about the business operations and deposit policies of its bank. Boston replied with a detailed description of the bank's practices and boasted that thirteen hundred depositors had invested "upwards of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars." Each investor received interest at two and a half percent. The bank, in concert with other lending institutions in the city, charged six percent interest in loans. This difference between the rates of interest for savings accounts and for loans promised a substantial profit to potential investors and was one way that the Boston Society was able to persuade other banks to support their efforts.[32]

The SPP also worked with owners of private companies to study the habits of the laboring poor. In 1820, James P. Allaire, owner of a large foundry on the east end

---

[31] *Report...on Idleness and Sources of Employment*, 10-11.
[32] *Documents Relative to Savings Banks, Intemperance and Lotteries*, 5-6.

of the city, conducted an experiment to see if his workers performed their jobs better if he denied them alcohol during the working hours. Up until this point workers in the foundry—and other manufacturing establishments across the city—had demanded access to alcohol throughout the day to help them bear the dismal and unhealthy work environment. The "confined atmosphere" of the workplace made it difficult for the men to hear and breathe, convincing many that the only way for them to "sustain themselves under the weight of their daily employments" was to drink. The Society monitored Allaire's experiment closely, convinced that the drinking of "ardent spirits" among the poor not only forced them into debt but also hindered their productivity at work. Alliare had noticed that among his sixty workers, those who "made no uses of ardent spirits" typically avoided debt and were able to support their families. The workers who did drink were not so fortunate. As a result, he prohibited the use of liquor in his shops to see if the situation of all of his workers improved. He concluded that without alcohol, most of his workers became "able and steady," earned more money, and enjoyed "domestic happiness" as a result. The SPP lauded Allaire's efforts, declaring that "this single experiment speaks volumes," and subsequently used this information to validate their assumption that intemperance was a major source of pauperism.[33]

In 1819 to help the committees conduct their research, the Society established a library containing essays, book, tracts and other printed works on poverty and related topics such as the national economy, prison management, and employment of the poor. Information gathering was central to the Society's mission: "It is essential in all human

[33] Rough Minutes of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism, September 6, 1820; *Fourth Annual Report of the Managers of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism*, 9-10.

associations for the improvement of our condition to walk in the light and under the guidance of the most useful knowledge." Without "knowledge" the Society did not believe that it could successfully root out the causes of poverty and implement solutions. The managers called on the members to collect any pamphlets, records, or reports that might be of use to the committees and donate them to the library.[34]

Once the SPP collected its data, it shared this information with various city officials, including the Common Council and the Commissioners of the Almshouse. The members believed that this information would allow the municipal government and relief institutions to adopt reforms which would decrease the number of "voluntary" paupers who depended on external support. Once these institutions were able to enact preventative measures to reduce the number of paupers, they would be able to better serve those who truly needed relief. Taxpayer money would as a result be applied more legitimately and soundly.

Sources of Pauperism

The SPP's investigators found a number of reasons to account for the working or able-bodied poor who fell into pauperism, but almost all were some sort of moral or character defect. Although legal reforms were crucial to the SPP's efforts, the members also stressed the importance of moral persuasion. Some habits, according to the Report on the Subject of Pauperism, "[lie] so deeply entrenched in the weakness and depravity

[34] *Second Annual Report of the Managers of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism*, 13-14.

of human nature" that "mere political regulation" could not hope to eliminate them. The only way to overcome these flaws was moral instruction and influence.[35]

According to the SPP, the "box of Pandora" and the "Cause of Causes" of poverty was intemperance. Over and over, the Society's reports argued that the "use of ardent spirits" was a cardinal danger to the social order. "Perhaps war and pestilence do not destroy a greater number of victims, than are sacrificed by strong drink," the Fourth Annual Report lamented. Intemperance brought slow but "certain death" to men and women as it destroyed the "self-respect," "moral senses," and every "social and kindred tie." Alcohol "drowns mental energy," "ruins the constitution," and "blasts domestic happiness." Moreover, alcohol consumption led to crime—especially among the poor, as it kindled the "fiercest passions in the bosom." After reviewing the records of the city's Court of Session, the SPP found that as the number of tavern licenses had increased in New York, so too had the number of arrests for assault and battery. In this case the Society concluded that "relation of cause and effect here are so apparent."[36]

Intemperance also destroyed families and even entire communities. In 1818, the committee investigating the general subject of pauperism estimated that New Yorkers spent "$1,460,000" at the 1,600 taverns and groceries holding liquor licenses that year. This amount was "extorted from the sweats of labour, and the tears and groans of suffering wives and children," forcing entire families into pauperism. Moreover, this money could have been spent more wisely in the community. Such a large sum could have been invested in the construction of schools and churches as a way to improve education and overall morality. Just as important, construction projects would have

---

[35] *Report of a Committee on the Subject of Pauperism*, 5.
[36] *Fourth Annual Report of the Managers of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism*, 6-7.

provided "honest and industrious mechanics" with much-needed work. These new buildings would have contributed to the public good, serving to "ornament the city" and spread virtue.[37]

The SPP also pointed to lotteries as sources of pauperism and argued that they robbed the poor of money and destroyed their morals. The state legislature of New York often granted licenses to "deserving" organizations such as charities to sell chances in lotteries as a means of raising funds. The Society for the Relief of Poor Widows, for instance, petitioned the state legislature for permission to hold a lottery. So, too, did the Orphan Asylum Society as it tried to raise funds to build a house for its children. Private individuals had also opened "lottery offices" in the city, however, and the SPP regarded them as a public "nuisance." Poor men and women, attracted by the prospect of winning money, often lost their meager wages on lottery tickets. The committee researching the New York lottery system concluded that lotteries were the "most injurious kind of taxation, and the very worst species of gambling." To make matters worse, fraud in the form of forged tickets was rampant in the lottery system, making the chances of winning even slimmer. Essentially, the lotteries proved to be a poor man's tax that "seduced" men and women and robbed them of their wages.[38]

Moreover, the Committee on Lotteries reported, the "depraving nature" of such games of chance led to other kinds of immoral behavior. Instead of going to work, laborers often waited outside of lottery offices to see if they held successful tickets. Once they found out that they lost, they often fell "prey to the feelings of desperation."

---

[37] *Report of a Committee on the Subject of Pauperism*, 17.
[38] *Documents Relative to Savings Banks, Intemperance and Lotteries*, 26.

More often than not, these individuals "sought refuge in the temporary, but fatal oblivion of intoxication."[39]

"Houses of ill fame" were another source of pauperism. Such "sinks of iniquity" destroyed men's integrity, encouraged a wide variety of immoral behaviors and robbed them of their money. The SPP appeared to be most concerned about the effects of brothels on men: "Open abandonment of character, vulgarity, profanity are among the inevitable consequences, as it respects our own sex, of those places of infamous resort." Men who frequented prostitutes became corrupt, lazy, licentious, and poor. The SPP did acknowledge, however, that prostitution had negative consequences on the women who worked in the sex trade. Expressing a similar attitude as the Magdalen Society, the SPP argued that prostituted women were "miserable victims" who in many cases had been forced into the profession by some external force. These women, who may have once come from "respectable families," were now subject to the cruelty and tyranny of their "inhuman masters." "Hardened in crime" they preyed upon weak men. As an animal hunting for its prey, they roamed through the city, "seeking whom they may devour."[40]

Even "want of cleanliness" figured in the SPP's explanation for pauperism. Disregard for one's hygiene and personal appearance indicated not only a "lack of shame" but also a "relaxation of moral rectitude" since, according to the Society, physical and moral agencies were intricately linked. To prove their point, the Committee on Pauperism asked readers to think of the physical appearance of criminals. "We rarely see the petty invaders of our rights and properties, the sons and daughters of

---

[39] *Report of a Committee on the Subject of Pauperism*, 6-7.
[40] Ibid., 7-8.

personal neatness in habits of dress," the committee declared in its report. Benevolent organizations, the report concluded, should make it a point to require pensioners to dress in a "clean and wholesome" manner so as to encourage "decency" among their children.[41] The assumption was that unclean living degraded an individual's character and tempted them to adopt habits that would end in pauperism. Moreover, cleanliness would lead to better health and ultimately result in more productive laborers. No notice was taken, however, of how the poverty of the wearers might account for the dirty or ragged state of the clothing they wore.

Other sources of pauperism included ignorance, gambling, the wiles of pawn brokers, and the conditions of prisons. The Report on Pauperism mentioned that the economic and social chaos created by war contributed to pauperism but quickly dismissed the matter on the grounds that the country was "happily blessed with a peace" at the time of the report in 1818. Moreover, since communities rarely could do anything to control the effects of war, it was pointless for the SPP to address the issue. Instead, the committee focused on elements presumptively within its control—namely the behaviors and habits of the poor. The next dilemma, therefore, was how to compel poor men and women to adopt "healthier" and more "moral" lifestyles.

Managing Pauperism

The SPP proposed a unique approach to pauperism by arguing that the government—at both the state and local levels—bore the primary responsibility for

[41] *Fourth Annual Report of the Managers of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism*, 27; *Report of a Committee on the Subject of Pauperism*, 36-37.

regulating the behavior of the poor. Because the SPP traced the source of pauperism to immoral behaviors and lifestyles among the poor, it believed that both "public" and "social" regulations were necessary to combat this problem. "When any measure for the promotion of public good or the prevention of public evil, founded upon equitable principles, is supported by a sufficient weight of social authority, it may gradually pass into full and complete operation, and become established upon a basis as firm as a law of legislative enactment."[42] In other words, social regulation—whether in the form of prescriptive legislation or poor relief reform—was the key to reducing the number of dependent poor in the city. The problem of pauperism was far too ingrained in society for private citizens to handle alone. Private charities should not take part in these reforms, as their efforts only increased dependence and indigence.

On numerous occasions, the SPP drafted petitions to the state legislature and Common Council to request that the number of available liquor licenses be reduced as a means to "improving the morals of the city" and "diminishing the quantity of the poor."[43] In 1819 the Society also petitioned the state legislature to the same effect. First, the Society requested that the legislature prevent taverns from operating grocery stores where individuals could purchase "goods, wares, merchandise, fruits or vegetables." If the licenses for liquor and for other goods were kept separate, then the poor would not be tempted to purchase alcohol on their shopping trips for daily items. Second, the petition suggested that tavern license fees run between twenty and one hundred dollars in order to make obtaining licenses cost prohibitive for establishments

---

[42] *Report of a Committee on the Subject of Pauperism*, 11.
[43] Rough Minutes of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism, January 15, 1821. See also January, 3, 1821; January 10, 1821; and January 19, 1820.

that catered to the poor and laboring-class clienteles. Another provision suggested that every tavern keeper be required to post a sign "in some conspicuous place on the outside of his house" stating that his license had been renewed. The petition also requested that the mayor of the city play a direct role in the granting of licenses and that the state legislature limit the total number of licenses that he would be allowed to grant. The Common Council could decrease that number even further, if it saw fit. Other provisions in the petition stipulated that tavern keepers could not keep a "disorderly house" or offer cock fights and gambling.[44]

The Society's petitions produced mixed results. This particular memorial to the state legislature in 1819 failed to procure the passage of new legislation. Cadwallader D. Colden, the mayor of New York, however, was much more sympathetic to the Society's mission, which perhaps explains why the Society was intent on placing him in charge of the distribution of tavern licenses. In a letter to the SPP dated December 1, 1819, he agreed that the number of tavern licenses needed to be reduced and promised to direct his energies to this end. He repeated the claim that intemperance was an "increasing" problem and argued that the city's efforts to reduce the number of "drunken" people had been successful so far.[45]

The SPP also suggested that the state legislature and city government pass legislation to reduce the number of immigrants entering New York. On several occasions the Society met with members of the Common Council to determine the number of immigrants arriving in New York City each year. The city government

---

[44] *Second Annual Report of the Managers of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism*, 10.
[45] Ibid., 11, 46.

reported that in 1820 alone, the number of immigrants reached over thirteen thousand.[46] Recent immigrants residing in the almshouse until they found employment accounted for two-thirds of the institution's residents. As the SPP saw it, the environment in the almshouse was demoralizing, leaving the immigrants "completely broken down by drunkenness and profligacy."[47] Their dependence on public alms became permanent.

The Society, however, did not see the new immigrants simply as the unfortunate victims of the almshouse. The immigrants were held to be exploiting the city's generous relief policies, draining the resources of the city relief programs, and thereby increasing taxes. "THEY ARE NOT OUR PAUPERS," the Second Annual Report declared. "They come from the four quarters of the world and are brought here by the four winds of heaven. New York is the resting place, and like another Constantinople in the days of the Crusades, is liable to be devoured by swarms of people with whom she has no alliance, either local or moral."[48]

In 1819, the SPP proposed three measures to the state legislature that could be used to combat the influx of immigrants. First, the Society recommended that existing immigration laws be reformed and that the state find better ways of reporting the arrival of foreigners to the city government. Up until this point, ship captains had 24 hours to report the number of foreigners aboard their ships to municipal authorities. This statute, however, was loosely enforced and the Society demanded a more effective method of keeping track of immigrants. Second, the Society requested that the state government

---

[46] Rough Minutes of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism, December 20, 1820, January 3, 1821.
[47] *Fifth Annual Report of the Managers of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism*, 14.
[48] *Second Annual Report of the Managers of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism*, 24.

become involved in removing immigrants from the city and finding places for them to reside in the interior regions of the state. Third, the Society offered to help the state find employment for immigrants. Such changes were necessary as the present system of laws was inadequate to deal with the influx of immigrants, people who were motivated by "want, by vice and by habit." According to the Society, this "phalanx of plunder and depredation" would only lead to increased immorality, poverty and crime in the city.[49]

Mayor Colden agreed that increased immigration was reaching a level of crisis. In his letter of December 1, 1819, to the SPP, he concurred that existing legislation regulating the entrance of immigrants into New York City contained too many loopholes and was haphazardly enforced. He noted that the previous summer he had decided to visit the wharves to examine the condition of the immigrants himself. Most of the people he encountered had come from Ireland and all were in a "wretched" state. One ship in particular carried sixty Irish men and women from New Jersey to New York City who were completely destitute and left on the road to "perish." The majority of these men, women and children ended up in the almshouse. His solution to this problem was better enforcement of existing laws and additional legislation that would end abuses in the system. All foreigners should be responsible for reporting their arrival to the mayor's office so that the city could monitor the number of immigrants. Unlike the SPP, however, he argued that no one should be turned away from the port or charged a fee when they arrived in the city. Such measures would only lead to more paupers as fees would take what little money an immigrant had. Moreover, the state—

---

[49] Ibid., 20-21.

or even the federal government—needed to pass laws that protected immigrants from opportunists who robbed them "of their last dollar" and deceived them with promises of employment and "all the comforts of life" when they arrived in America. Only these measures could help prevent newly arrived immigrants from becoming residents in the almshouse.[50]

The SPP, more than any of its predecessors, was a lobbying outfit dedicated to procuring legislation as a means of dealing with poverty. Many of its efforts to gain the cooperation of state authorities, however, failed to produce the desired results. After failing to persuade the state legislature to create laws limiting the sale of hard alcohol, the members moaned, "It is utterly impossible to encounter the extensive and destructive use of ardent spirits without the co-operation of our public guardians."[51] Here, the SPP's members are arguing that state and local authorities were guardians of the public well-being and that politicians were obligated to protect the city's inhabitants from elements that jeopardized the common good. The SPP continued to adhere to this ideal despite its difficulties to convince politicians of the same.

In addition to promoting new regulatory legislation, the SPP worked toward reforming public poor relief policy and the institutions that cared for the poor. Once again, the cooperation and support of the state and city governments were crucial to their success. Only a complete overhaul of the present system, as they saw it, could end the poor's dependence on external support and the proliferation of paupers throughout the city. "It may appear extravagant," the Fifth Annual Report declared, "but genuine humanity and benevolence to the poor themselves would dictate the *abolition of our*

---

[50] Ibid., 59-60.
[51] *Fourth Annual Report of the Managers of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism*, 11.

pauper system [emphasis added]." If paupers—excluding involuntary paupers who would always rely on public support—could no longer depend on public alms or refuge in the almshouse, they would intensify their efforts at finding employment. With no alternative in sight, poor men and women would have to become "sober, industrious and economical." Again, the assumption of the SPP was that unhealthy behaviors were behind the plight of the majority of paupers, not the caprices of the economy.[52]

One possible alternative to the city's almshouse would be a workhouse, where the poor would receive food and shelter in exchange for their labor. This suggestion marked a major shift in thinking as reformers began to adopt punitive measures to combat poverty and what they considered to be the "laziness" of the poor. The almshouse would no longer be merely a shelter for the poor but a penitentiary focused on labor, discipline and reform. Such a workhouse—often referred to by the SPP as a "House of Refuge" or "House of Industry"—would not only provide the poor with employment, but it would also help the city "distinguish between involuntary and voluntary paupers." If the residents of the workhouse were forced to labor, the SPP argued, then the "able-bodied" paupers unwilling to work would avoid public aid while the poor who chose to remain in the workhouse would earn their food and provisions through "weaving, pin-making, or other manufacturing."[53]

Efficient managers would use "rigorous discipline" to maintain the workhouse and ensure that all of the inhabitants obeyed its rules. The workhouse would forbid the consumption of alcohol, provide religious and moral instruction to the residents, and in general, rid the poor of their "vicious habits." In order for this system to work, the

---

[52] *Fifth Annual Report of the Managers of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism*, 21.
[53] Ibid., 29-34.

proper authorities must be vested with enough power to enforce the regulations of the workhouse. "The discipline of hunger" would force most to acquiesce to the new poor laws.[54]

The city's youth—particularly juvenile delinquents who often ended up in the state prison—would similarly benefit from a workhouse. The Society found that many of the children who were charged with crimes were children of the poor, often abandoned to beg and pilfer in the streets. A separate workhouse, or "House of Refuge" for youth, could provide these boys and girls with employment and moral instruction. "Human nature," the Society argued, "is not so uniformly depraved as to be criminal from a love of crime, but oftener from necessity or accident, or bad education or evil example." By teaching the youth new skills or binding them out to farmers or ship captains the members hoped to prevent poor boys and girls from becoming permanent dependents.[55]

Prisons could also use compulsory labor to reform its inmates. The SPP congratulated the New York prison system for introducing a "stepping mill" in its discipline routine in imitation of the British example. The labor produced by the mill, the SPP argued, would save the state thousands of dollars a year because the prisoners by grinding grain earned money for their own keep. No skill was needed to work on such a mill—all a person had to do was step on the rotating platforms to operate it. Work on the mill could even be used to mete out punishments to recalcitrant inmates: the mill's "monotonous steadiness," the SPP proudly proclaimed, produces "terror" among the workers and "breaks down the obstinate and criminal spirit." There was no

---

[54] Ibid.
[55] *Sixth Annual Report of the Managers of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism*, 10-11.

reason that a mill could not also be introduced in the almshouse. The mill would change the environment in both institutions, making them "workshops of industry" and "terrors to evil-doers."[56]

The SPP also suggested that the municipal government initiate public works projects to employ the poor and decrease their dependence on relief. A few of the civic projects that the Society proposed were the extension of the Battery, street repairs, and the construction of a public bath house. These and similar projects would provide employment to the unemployed and offer supplemental work to the various mechanics in the city—especially in the winter months when carpenters, stone-cutters, masons, and other tradesmen experience a decrease in available work. An increase in employment through public works would also preserve order in the city. According to the Society's Report on Idleness, unemployed men often turned out to be "a most disagreeable and *dangerous* burden to society."[57]

Providing funds for public works projects would be difficult, but the SPP offered the municipal government a few suggestions. The state legislature, for instance, could be approached to offer extra appropriations to the city for such projects. The city, on its part, could direct a portion of existing poor taxes that normally supported public relief to these efforts. If these methods did not raise enough revenue, then the city could impose new taxes, possibly on the theater, circus or other forms of public entertainment. The theater was often a cause of pauperism, according to the Society, as the poor frivolously spent their money at the shows. "We ask then," declared the Committee on Idleness, "is it not an imperious obligation, that some of the drops of this mighty drain

---

[56] Ibid., 13-16.
[57] *Report...on Idleness and Sources of Employment*, 11.

should be diverted into a channel which may be considered as in some degree remediating?"[58]

The SPP acknowledged that not all sources of pauperism could be addressed through coercive legislation or poor relief reform. The Society also recommended moral persuasion. The members of the Society—particularly the visiting committees—would be able to use their moral influence to transform the presumptively immoral habits of the poor. "We hold it a plain and fundamental truth," the Society pronounced in its Report on Pauperism, "that one of the most powerful incitements to an honest and honourable course of conduct, is regard to reputation." The Society assumed that poor men and women would want to earn the respect of their middle- and upper-class visitors and as such change their behavior: "Finding that they have real friends, that their conduct is an object of solicitude, that their characters will be the subject of remark, a sense of decency and a spirit of independence will be awakened." The result of this change in character would be a noticeable decline in the city's poor rates, an argument the SPP used over and over again in advocating its proposed reforms.[59]

Conclusion

The third wave of benevolence was dominated by the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism, an organization that was not inspired by any single religious doctrine and that did not encourage the expansion of charitable aid in any form. Instead, its members focused on the sources of indigence and conducted investigations in the hope of finding

[58] Ibid., 12.
[59] *Report of a Committee on the Subject of Pauperism,* 13.

a "cure" to this social ill. The Society did resemble organizations founded in the course of the first two waves of benevolence in its emphasis on strengthening the Republic and its willingness to use moral suasion to change the habits of the impoverished. Although traditional charities did not disappear at this time, the efforts of the SPP did alter poor relief practices in New York City. Both public and private relief organizations became more concerned with the growing "dependency" of the poor and adopted measures to thwart this perceived danger.

Within a span of over thirty years, the benevolent movement in Early National New York had adopted three distinct methods to combat poverty. All of the organizations—whether they fit into the first, second or third wave of benevolence—were narrow in their focus and committed themselves to single issues. The societies of the first wave emphasized direct relief and a degree of religious instruction. The second wave of benevolence argued that evangelicalism was the key to cure poverty and focused on proselytization of the poor. The third wave rejected the methods of the former two groups and emphasized the systematic formulation and implementation of "scientific" policies that would lead to the prevention of pauperism. All three, however, shared the basic assumption that extreme poverty stemmed from some sort of immoral behavior on the part of the poor, whether stigmatized as "vice" or "sin." Most importantly, all three waves agreed that poverty was a significant threat to the economic, social and political future of the new Republic. This connection between poor relief and conceptions of national interest would continue to influence many benevolent organizations throughout the nineteenth century.

CONCLUSION

RELIGIOUS BENEVOLENCE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The sheer number of benevolent societies formed to combat poverty in New York in the Early National Period is proof itself that the middle- and upper-class inhabitants of the city considered it to be one of the most serious and significant threats to their community. Both religious and secular motives persuaded middle-class men and women to take on the daunting task of reducing, and in some cases even eliminating, poverty. First, traditional Calvinist theology, with its emphasis on the reciprocal relationship between the rich and the poor, continued to spur many reformers to action. The wealthy still had a divinely mandated obligation to help the less fortunate, while the poor had an obligation to demonstrate their gratitude by adopting an "upright" and "moral" life-style. Second, republican nationalism and its urge to protect the new Republic from the crime, inequality and suffering associated with poverty convinced many members of the middle class to support benevolent organizations. Reformers were determined to create a utopian society, free from the poverty and corruption found in Europe. The founders of New York's benevolent societies hoped that their local efforts would work in conjunction with those of other cities to revolutionize the nation as a whole.

The Benevolent Movement in Early National New York City passed through three distinct and overlapping stages in the time period spanning 1784 to 1820, each

with different methods and approaches to poverty. Although the concepts and imperatives associated with Calvinism and nationalism influenced each of the waves, the reformers' ideas about the nature of poverty and its cures evolved from one stage to the next as many philanthropists, discouraged by their lack of success in reducing the amount of poverty in their city, transferred their energies into newer and different forms of action. The first wave of benevolence focused on providing direct relief to the poor and served groups traditionally accepted as worthy of aid, including widows, orphans and the elderly. Although the efforts of these societies helped many men and women on an individual basis, they did not succeed in addressing the systemic causes of poverty in general. The second wave of benevolence, in contrast, was less interested in providing material relief and more concerned with the moral and spiritual state of the poor. Proselytization and moral reform campaigns characterized this stage as reformers grew more convinced that some sort of moral deficiency and irreligion among the poor was the source of this group's suffering. If the poor could only be converted to the reformers' brand of Protestantism and live according to this group's definition of morality, then they would be able to overcome their indigence. The third and final wave abandoned the methods of the first two and instead preferred to find ways to prevent pauperism—a form of poverty characterized by a person's complete dependency on charity for survival—altogether. Frustrated by what they considered to be the failures of traditional charities and a broken public relief system, the founders of the third wave sought to investigate the causes of pauperism and recommend methods for its prevention. Given the scope of their ambitions, no group of reformers at any time in the history of the benevolent movement could really claim a substantial degree

of success for their efforts to eliminate poverty. Nonetheless, at every stage, from first to last, a sense of optimism continued to characterize the city's benevolent societies. Middle-class men and women who participated in these societies were convinced that their efforts would create a nation economically viable, politically stable, and governed by a consensual Protestant morality.

Earlier studies of poor relief in Early National New York—particularly from the 1970s and 1980s—emphasized the "social control" model, which argued that the combined efforts of private charity and public poor relief served as a tool to keep the poor docile. According to this theory, the middle class was fearful of a potentially riotous and even revolutionary underclass whose dire socio-economic status might cause them to undermine social order. The social control model is useful to a point. The middle class did harbor genuine fears of a discontented poor community and hoped that a more effective relief system would not only reduce some of the discontent of poor men and women but also convince them to adopt "appropriate" Protestant bourgeois behaviors such as piety, industry and frugality. What this model overlooks, however, is that the reformers believed that much more was at stake. The members of benevolent organizations were much more motivated by a desire to create a strong republic filled with Protestant citizens working together to accomplish God's ends. Eighteenth-century Protestant definitions of poverty and nineteenth-century secular notions of nationalism combined to create a new form of charity.

Benevolent societies continued to multiply in the United States throughout the antebellum era. Poverty continued to grow rapidly not only in New York but also in the nation as a whole, and new societies emerged to try to address this seemingly

intractable social problem. Most of these societies adopted assumptions similar to those of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism and demonstrated increasing dissatisfaction with traditional forms of poor relief. Bruce Dorsey in *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* finds that Philadelphia's societies after 1820 grew increasingly critical in their attitude toward poverty and began to blame private charities for encouraging dependency among the poor. Reformers also began to blame the poor for their own condition, citing vice or immorality as the cause of their impoverishment. Language such as "worthy poor" faded away from the newer societies' records as fewer and fewer reformers were able to find any segment of the poor who could be considered blameless. Even the word "poor" was eventually replaced with the more negative term "pauper" in many records. Reformers no longer pointed to God's providence or the economic fluctuations of the market economy to find poverty's source. What the poor, now paupers, needed was not charity but reform and discipline. Only moral reform and the removal of certain vices, including intemperance, could help the poor overcome their indigence.[1]

Ezra Stiles Ely provides a good example of how the attitudes of many reformers towards the poor and poor relief hardened after 1820. Ely moved from New York to Philadelphia in 1813. He continued to engage in benevolent activities in his new home, but his writings no longer reflected the sympathy that he had once felt for the poor as the preacher to New York's almshouse, hospital and prison. Instead of lamenting the sorry condition of poor men and women or railing against the economic inequalities produced by the new market economy, he focused on the corrupt character of the

[1] Dorsey, 51-63.

indigent. Vice and immorality were now for him the main causes of their suffering, and the only solution to this dilemma was collective moral reform.[2]

After the 1820s, the evangelical movements increasingly dominated the provision of benevolence in the United States. Anne Boylan argues that in the case of New York the revivals of Charles Finney and his emphasis on social reform played a large role in the development of new societies. Finney's evangelicalism combined with his concern with social problems prompted many benevolent organizations to adopt his methods. As a result, new missionary, Bible, religious tract and reform societies abounded, often outnumbering the older, more traditional charities.[3]

Benevolence in the decades following 1820 adopted new tactics for dealing with poverty, many of which originated with the societies from what I have referred to as the second and third waves of benevolence. The notion that evangelical Protestantism and moral reform campaigns would be the best "cure" for poverty became the dominant force in benevolent activity. Traditional charities did not disappear, but many did adjust their policies to reflect this new attitude toward poverty. After 1820 the poor would bear more and more responsibility for their socio-economic conditions. Ideas such as the inevitability and even the necessity of poverty as a part of the divine plan would slowly disappear as society as a whole would become much more intolerant of indigence. The poor were now considered to be a morally flawed group as a whole, and although a few might be rescued from dependence, the majority were seen as

---

[2] Ibid., 80-81.
[3] Boylan, 32-36.

irredeemable. Regardless, all classes of poor were to be coerced into accepting middle-class definitions of morality, for their own good and the greater good of the Protestant Republic.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Manuscript Sources

New York Historical Society, New York.
Association for the Relief of Respectable, Aged, Indigent Females in New York City Papers
Christian Benevolent Society Papers
Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton Papers
Humane Society Papers
John Stanford Papers
Society for the Prevention of Pauperism Papers
Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children Papers

New York Municipal Archives, New York.
Almshouse Papers, 1758-1953
Common Council Papers, 1647-1977

Published Primary Sources

An Account of the Marine Society, Recommending the Piety and Policy of the Institution, and Pointing out the Advantages Accruing to the Nation. London, 1759.

An Account of the Rise, Progress and Present State of the Magdalen Hospital for the Reception of Penitent Prostitutes. London, 1776.

An Account of the Rise, Progress and Present State of the Society for the Discharge and Relief of Persons Imprisoned for Small Debts. London, 1784.

The Annual Report and Account Current of the Orphan Asylum Society in the City of New York for April 1819. New York, 1819.

"Annual Report of Diseases Treated at the Public Dispensary, New York, During the Year 1816." *The American Monthly Magazine and Critical Review* 1 (May 1817): 68-70.

Assistance Society for Relieving and Advising Sick and Poor Persons in the City of New York, Constitution adopted December 10, 1808. New York, 1809.

The By-Laws and Regulations of the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children. New York, 1813.

Clinton, DeWitt. *An Address to the Benefactors and Friends of the Free School Society of New York, Delivered on the Opening of that Institution, in Their New and Spacious Building, on the Eleventh of the Twelfth Month 1809.* New York, 1810.

Constitution and By-Laws of the Magdalen Society of New York. New York, 1812.

The Constitution and First and Second Annual Reports of the Proceedings of the Association for the Relief of Respectable, Aged, Indigent Females. New York, 1815.

The Constitution, Laws and By-Laws of the Orphan Asylum of the City of New York with the Annual Reports and A List of Donations from its First Institution. New York, 1815.

Constitution of the Ladies' Society, Established in New York for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children. New York, 1800.

The Constitution of the New York Marine Missionary Society. New York, 1818.

Documents Relative to Savings Banks, Intemperance and Lotteries. New York, 1819.

Ely, Ezra Stiles. *Journal of the Stated Preacher to the Hospital and Almshouse in the City of New York, for the Year of Our Lord, 1811.* New York, 1812.

_____. *A Sermon for the Rich to Buy, That They May Benefit Themselves and the Poor.* New York, 1810.

"Essay on the Use of Quicksilver." *The Medical Repository of Original Essays and Intelligence* 19, no. 1 (1818): 30-32.

Fifth Annual Report of the Managers of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism in the City of New York. New York, 1821.

First Annual Report of the Magdalen Society of New York. New York, 1813.

Fourth Annual Report of the Managers of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism of the City of New York. New York, 1821.

Fourth Report of the Board of Trustees of the Society for the Support of the Gospel Among the Poor in the City of New York. New York, 1817.

Griffin, Edward D. *The Claims of Seamen, A Sermon Preached November 1, 1819 in the Brick Church, New York, for the Benefit of the Marine Missionary Society of that City.* New York, 1819.

Hall, Francis. *Travels in Canada and the United States in 1816 and 1817.* London, 1819.

"History of the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children." *New York Missionary Magazine and Repository of Religious Intelligence* (1803): 4.

Instructions, Religious and Prudential to Apprentices and Servants in General, Placed Out by the Marine Society. London, 1763.

Longworth's American Almanac, New York Register and City Directory. New York, 1801.

Longworth's American Almanac, New York Register and City Directory. New York, 1804.

"Martha Boyd's Cases, Indicted with Christopher Boyd, Her Husband, and Christopher Waters and John Williams." *The New York City Hall Recorder, Containing Reports of the Most Interesting Trials and Decisions* 3, no. 9 (September 1818): 134-136.

McLeod, Alexander. *A Scriptural View of the Character, Causes and Ends of the Present War.* New York, 1815.

"Means By Which Diseases From Hard Drinking and Venereal Virus are Promoted." *The Medical Repository of Original Essays and Intelligence* 7, no. 1 (1803): 89-91.

Miller, Samuel. *A Sermon Preached March 13, 1808 for the Benefit of the Society Instituted in the City of New York for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children.* New York, 1808.

Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1784-1831. New York, 1917.

Perrine, Matthew La Rue. *Women Have a Work to do in the House of the Lord: A Discourse Delivered at the First Annual Meeting of the Female Missionary Society for the Poor of the City of New York and its Vicinity*. New York, 1817.

The Power of Faith: Exemplified in the Life and Writings of the Late Mrs. Isabella Graham of New York. New York, 1816.

Report of a Committee on the Subject of Pauperism. New York, 1818.

Report to the Managers of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism in New York by Their Committee on Idleness and Sources of Employment. New York, 1819.

Rodgers, John. *The Divine Goodness Displayed in the American Revolution: A Sermon, Preached in New York, December 11, 1783 Appointed by Congress as a Day of Public Thanksgiving Throughout the United States*. New York, 1784.

Romeyn, John B. *A Sermon, Delivered in the Middle Dutch Church, March 21, 1819, for the Benefit of the Marine Missionary Society*. New York, 1819.

Rowan, Steven. *The Sin and Danger of Insensibility Under the Calls of God to Repentance*. New York, 1812.

The Rules, Orders and Regulations of the Magdalen House for the Reception of Penitent Prostitutes. London, 1759.

Second Anniversary Report of the Female Missionary Society for the Poor of the City of New York and its Vicinity. New York, 1818.

Second Annual Report of the Managers of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism in the City of New York. New York, 1820.

A Short Account of the Magdalen Hospital. London, 1807.

Sixth Annual Report of the Managers of the Society of the Prevention of Pauperism of the City of New York. New York, 1823.

A Sketch of the Origin and Progress of the Humane Society of the City of New York Together with the Act of Incorporation and By-Laws. New York, 1814.

Spring, Gardiner. *The Excellence and Influence of the Female Character, a Sermon*. New York, 1825.

Stafford, Ward. *New Missionary Field, A Report to the Female Missionary Society for the Poor of the City of New York and its Vicinity at its Quarterly Prayer Meeting*. New York, 1817.

Stanford, John. *Composure in Death. A Discourse Delivered in the Orphan Asylum, New York, on the Death of Mrs. Sarah Hoffman, First Directress of the Institution.* New York, 1821.

Third Annual Report of the Magdalen Society of New York. New York, 1815.

The Unpublished Letters and Correspondence of Mrs. Isabella Graham, From the Year 1767 to 1814; Exhibiting Her Religious Character in the Different Relations of Life, Selected and Arranged by Her Daughter. New York, 1838.

Whelpley, Philip Melanchthon. *A Sermon Delivered on the 4th of February 1816 for the Benefit of a Society of Ladies Instituted for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children.* New York, 1816.

Newspapers

Commercial Advertiser
Daily Advertiser
New York Evening Post
New York Packet
New York Weekly Museum

Books and Articles

Alexander, Edward P. *A Revolutionary Conservative: James Duane of New York.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1938.

Alexander, John K. *Render Them Submissive: Responses to Poverty in Philadelphia, 1760-1800.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980.

Anbinder, Tyler. *Five Points: The Nineteenth-Century New York City Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum.* New York: The Free Press, 2001.

Balmer, Randall and John R. Fitzmier. *The Presbyterians.* Westport: Greenwood Press, 1933.

Barry, Jonathan and Colin Jones, eds. *Medicine and Charity Before the Welfare State.* New York: Routledge, 1991.

Berlin, Ira and Leslie Harris, eds. *Slavery in New York.* New York: New Press, 2005.

Bloch, Ruth H. *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756-1800.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Boylan, Anne M. *The Origins of Women's Activism: New York and Boston, 1797-1840.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

_____. "Timid Girls, Venerable Widows and Dignified Matrons: Life Cycle Patterns Among Organized Women in New York and Boston, 1797-1840." *American Quarterly* 38, no. 5 (Winter 1986): 779-797.

_____. "Women in Groups: An Analysis of Women's Benevolent Organizations in New York and Boston, 1797-1840." *The Journal of American History* 71, no. 3 (December 1984): 497-523.

Bridenbaugh, Carl. *Cities in the Wilderness: The First Century of Urban Life in America, 1625-1742.* New York: Capricorn Books, 1964.

Burder, Rev. Samuel, ed. *Memoirs of Eminently Pious Women of the British Empire.* Vol. 2. London, 1815.

Burrows, Edwin G. and Mike Wallace. *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Campbell, Ted A. "Evangelical Institutionalism and Evangelical Sectarianism in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain and America." In *Amazing Grace: Evangelicalism in Australia, Britain, Canada and the United States*, edited by George A. Rawlyk and Mark A. Noll. Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994.

Clark, Peter. *British Clubs and Societies, 1580-1800: The Origins of an Associational World.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000.

Conkin, Paul K. *The Uneasy Center: Reformed Christianity in Antebellum America.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995.

Cray, Robert E., Jr. *Paupers and Poor Relief in New York City and Its Rural Environs, 1700-1830.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988.

Daunton, Martin, ed. *Charity, Self-Interest and Welfare in the English Past.* London: UCL Press, 1996.

Dorsey, Bruce. *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002.

Dwight, Timothy. *Travels in New England and New York*. Edited by Barbara Miller Solomon. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969.

Epstein, Barbara Leslie. *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1981.

Foster, Charles I. *An Errand of Mercy: The Evangelical United Front, 1790-1837*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1960.

Gilfoyle, Timothy J. *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1992.

_____. "City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920." Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1987.

Gilje, Paul A. "Infant Abandonment in Early Nineteenth-Century New York City: Three Cases." *Signs* 8, no. 3 (Spring 1983): 580-590.

_____. *Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.

_____. "On the Waterfront: Maritime Workers in New York City in the Early Republic, 1800-1850." *New York History* (October 1996): 395-426.

_____. "The Rise of Capitalism in the Early Republic." *Journal of the Early Republic* 16, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 159-181.

_____. *The Road to Mobocracy: Popular Disorder in New York City, 1763-1834*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987.

Ginzberg, Lori D. *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

Griffin, Clifford S. *Their Brothers' Keepers: Moral Stewardship in the United States, 1800-1865*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1960.

Hacsi, Timothy A. *Second Home: Orphan Asylums and Poor Families in America* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Hatch, Nathan O. *The Democratization of American Christianity*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.

_____. *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977.

Heale, M.J. "Humanitarianism in the Early Republic: The Moral Reformers of New York, 1776-1825." *The Journal of American Studies* 2, no. 2 (October 1968): 161-175.

_____. "The New York Society for the Prevention of Pauperism, 1817-1823." *New York Historical Society Quarterly* 55 (1971): 153-176.

_____. "Patterns of Benevolence: Charity and Morality in Rural and Urban New York, 1783-1830." *Societas* 3 (1973): 337-359.

Hill, Marilynn Wood. *Their Sisters' Keepers: Prostitution in New York City, 1830-1870.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

Hood, Fred J. *Reformed America: The Middle and Southern States, 1783-1837.* University: The University of Alabama Press, 1980.

Innes, Joanna. "The 'Mixed Economy of Welfare'in Early Modern England: Assessments of the Options from Halle to Malthus (c. 1683-1803). In *Charity, Self-Interest and Welfare in the English Past*, edited by Martin Daunton. London: UCL Press, 1996.

Johnson, Allen and Dumas Malone, eds., *Dictionary of American Biography*, 10 vols. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964.

Juster, Susan. *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics and Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994.

_____. *Doomsayers: Anglo-American Prophecy in the Age of Revolution.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

Kerber, Linda K. *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980.

Kornblum, William. *At Sea in the City: New York from the Water's Edge*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2002.

Levene, Alysa, Thomas Nutt, and Samantha Williams, eds. *Illegitimacy in Britain, 1700-1920.* New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005.

Lewis, Jan. *The Pursuit of Happiness: Family and Values in Jefferson's Virginia.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Marsden, George M. *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience: A Case Study of Thought and Theology in Nineteenth-Century America.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970.

_____. "Introduction: Reformed and American." In *Reformed Theology in America: A History of Its Modern Development*, edited by David F. Wells. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997.

Mathews, Joanna Hooe. *A Short History of the Orphan Asylum Society in the City of New York, Founded 1806.* New York: Anson D.F. Randolph and Company, 1893.

Mohl, Raymond. *Poverty in New York, 1783-1825.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1971.

Moreau de St. Méry's American Journey. Translated by Kenneth Roberts and Anna M. Roberts. Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1947.

Newman, Simon P. *Embodied History: The Lives of the Poor in Early Philadelphia.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

Noll, Mark A. *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada.* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992.

_____. *The Old Religion in a New World: The History of North American Christianity.* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002.

_____. "Revival, Enlightenment, Civic Humanism, and the Evolution of Calvinism in Scotland and America, 1735-1843." In *Amazing Grace: Evangelicalism in Australia, Britain, Canada and the United States*, edited by George A. Rawlyk and Mark A. Noll. Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994.

Norton, Mary Beth. *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society.* New York: A.A. Knopf, 1996.

Pointer, Richard W. *Protestant Pluralism and the New York Experience: A Study of Eighteenth-Century Religious Diversity.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.

Pomerantz, Sidney I. *New York: An American City, 1783-1803.* Port Washington: Ira J. Friedman, Inc., 1965.

Pratt, John Webb. *Religion, Politics, and Diversity: The Church-State Theme in New York History*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967.

Rawlyk, George A. and Mark A. Noll. *Amazing Grace: Evangelicalism in Australia, Britain, Canada and the United States*. Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994.

Rock, Howard B. *Artisans of the New Republic: The Tradesmen of New York City in the Age of Jefferson*. New York: New York University Press, 1984.

Rosenberg, Carroll Smith. *Religion and the Rise of the American City: The New York City Mission Movement, 1812-1870*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971.

Rothchild, Nan A. *New York City Neighborhoods: The Eighteenth Century*. San Diego: Academic Press, 1990.

Rothman, David J. *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971.

Schneider, David M. *The History of Public Welfare in New York State, 1609-1866*. Montclair: Patterson Smith, 1969.

Sharp, Rev. T. *The Heavenly Sisters; or Biographical Sketches of the Lives of Thirty Eminently Pious Females*. New Haven: N. Whiting, 1822.

Smith, Billy G., ed. *Down and Out in Early America*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004.

Stansell, Christine. *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987.

Taylor, James Stephen. *Jonas Hanway Founder of the Marine Society: Charity and Policy in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. London: Scolar Press, 1985.

Walsh, Sister Marie de Lourdes. *The Sisters of Charity of New York, 1809-1959*. Vol. 1. New York: Fordham University Press, 1960.

Wells, David. F., ed. *Reformed Theology in America: A History of Its Modern Development*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997.

White, Shane. *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770-1810*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991.

Wilentz, Sean. *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1984.

Williams, Samantha. "A Good Character for Virtue, Sobriety, and Honesty: Unmarried Mothers' Petitions to the London Foundling Hospital and the Rhetoric of Need in the Early Nineteenth Century." In *Illegitimacy in Britain, 1700-1920*, edited by Alysa Levene, Thomas Nutt, and Samantha Williams. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005.

Wilson, James Grant and John Fiske, eds., *Appleton's Cyclopædia of American Biography*, 7 vols. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1894-1900.

Wilson, Renate. *Pious Traders in Medicine: A German Pharmaceutical Network in Eighteenth-Century North America.* University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000.

Wolf, Stuart. "The Societe de Charite Maternelle, 1788-1815." In *Medicine and Charity Before the Welfare State*, edited by Jonathan Barry and Colin Jones. New York: Routledge, 1991.

Young, Alfred F. *The Democratic Republicans of New York: The Origins, 1763-1797.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1967.

APPENDIX

A LIST OF BENEVOLENT SOCIETIES IN EARLY NATIONAL NEW YORK CITY

A LIST OF BENEVOLENT SOCIETIES IN EARLY NATIONAL NEW YORK CITY

NAME	DATES	PURPOSE
The Assistance Society for Relieving and Advising Sick and Poor Persons in the City of New York (The Assistance Society)	1808-?	To provide material relief and religious instruction to the poor and sick.
The Association for the Relief of Respectable, Aged, Indigent Females (ARAIF)	1814-1882	To provide material relief to poor but "respectable" women over the age of sixty.
The Christian Benevolent Society	1804-1817	To provide material relief and religious instruction to the poor and sick of all denominations.
The Female Missionary Society for the Poor of the City of New York	1816-1825	To promote Protestant Christianity among the poor. The society hired ministers to preach to the poor and constructed churches in poor neighborhoods.
The Humane Society of New York (also known as the Society for the Relief of Distressed Debtors)	1787-1825	To provide imprisoned debtors with material relief, medical care and legal aid. In 1802 the society established a Soup House to feed the city's poor.
The Magdalen Society	1812-1816	To provide the city's prostitutes with moral reform and employment. In 1813 the Society established an asylum to house "penitent" prostitutes.
The New York Marine Missionary Society (Marine Missionary Society)	1818-?	To promote the religious and moral reform of sailors by hiring preachers and constructing churches near the wharves.

NAMES	DATES	PURPOSE
The Orphan Asylum Society of the City of New York (OAS)	1806-1932	To provide orphans with shelter, food, medical care, education and religious instruction. In 1807 the Society began construction of a permanent asylum to house the children.
The Society for the Prevention of Pauperism (SPP)	1817-1823	To research the causes of pauperism and design a plan to eradicate this problem.
The Society for the Promotion of of Industry (SPI)	1814-?	To find employment for the widows of the SRPW and other unemployed women. In 1814 the Society established a "House of Industry" to employ the women in washing and spinning.
The Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children (SRPW)	1797-1922	To provide widows and their families with material aid, cash, medical care and religious instruction.
The Society for the Support of the Gospel Among the Poor of the City of New York (SSGP)	1812-?	To provide city institutions such as the almshouse, hospital, and prison with a permanent minister. The Society also sponsored church construction projects in poor neighborhoods.